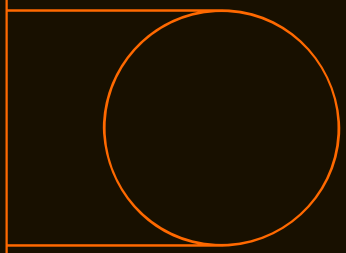
Lex Rive



Officina Hermeneutica:
The Barrel Organ and Solid Body of Emma Prithream

130

What lies before you is a nightmare-diving deep-sea suit, designed to let you descend to depths where one fears even to cast a glance. The indecent volume of "white flame"—where meaning does not hide, as usual, between the lines, but lurks between the very letters, in the interstices among the black strokes—is a necessary, ritual enactment of fetishism: a meticulously crafted black leather harness without which one could scarcely have approached the subject of inquiry at all. After all, the weight of the gear must match the depth of the dive.

Now, about the phenomenon in question: The maximum of evil is examined here in the mathematical sense—to reach the theoretical limit requires not so much catastrophic damage on a universal scale, as the utmost baseness and emptiness of motive.

Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?

Lex Rive

Officina Hermeneutica:

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Fragment 19. Fugitive Inertia: Aris Confronts the Inconceivable

¶

The target was far, at the extreme limit of an arrow's flight. Precisely for that reason, it was perfectly visible. A message that had traveled through the air for no less than half a league is, in formal terms, a postal dispatch. Should the arrow lodge itself in the door, the missive becomes a lawful circular between states—one could choose: a foreign dispatch within local politics or a diplomatic note directed abroad. Rich soil for future machinations. A warranty, solid as bedrock, for deeds already done.

Quiet. From somewhere above, off a tree leaf, a drop fell onto the very tip of his nose. Aris did not wipe it away. He used a hand-cranked minikin mill to crumble dry talc onto his hands, for precision of touch.

Should it miss, however—he would be violating the integrity of the border. The state boundary coincides with the actual watershed, not with any line or markers a man might stake upon the terrain. This transforms the landscape into a juridical map. Thus did the Makers bequeath it. And at this moment, Aris's physiology, his capacity to hit the mark, constituted an act of policy. Aris knew the price of his shots: into the door—a diplomatic note; wide—contraband.

To be certain, Aris treated the fog with simplicity. He waited it out. He sat upon the rocky crest of the watershed. Rain began to speckle. A drop that fell upon his left boot would presently roll into the soil, reach a stream, and depart into the Great River of his native land, Illumiros, to grow old in the eastern sea. A drop from his right boot would die in the waves of the western sea, in the delta of the foreign river Maristea.

⁂

"The boots are so different today," he thought. "Never paid them any mind before."

Chiding himself for his head being in the clouds, Aris ceased his inspection of his own footwear and hastily wrapped his man-high bow in oiled canvas. The

wood of a precision weapon does not forgive moisture. Having waited a while, gauging the density of the air to the right and left, Aris covered himself with his waterproof cape and set about unwinding the arrow. The humidity had altered the air's density, and the balance of the instrument required adjustment. The spiral of the ancient tree's trunk supported his back.

His back, it turned out, was not averse to taking on the shape of the tree.

He loosened the finest bindings that held the parchment wrapped around the shaft. The letter, intended for dispatch by arrow, unfurled in a spiral. Now it had to be removed and wound tight once more, shifted by half a finger's length toward the arrowhead. Inconvenient, but there was no other way. A few minutes later, Aris, eyes half-closed, was feeling the readjusted arrow with both hands. He touched it to his cheek, striving to breathe into the precise instrument the air necessary for a long and accurate flight through the hostile element of moisture.

For a time, he simply wiggled the toe of his right boot. Right. Left.

Right. Left.

The rain ceased. The fog dispersed. Aris took out his spyglass. In his sights was a house. A solid, broad door. Homesteads on the crest of a watershed are a privilege of rich pettifoggers, those who know how to extract coin and political capital from a geographic quirk. "No quandary, no experience," Aris amused himself, cheered by the end of the wait, watching an enormous ant crawling along the tree trunk. And then he sent it flying with a flick of his finger. The flight was a gliding one.

⁂

Aris, the sole living representative of his ancient Line, prepared to shoot. His body, together with the bow, composed a rune worthy of a calligrapher's brush. Saliva gathered in his mouth—moisture whose juridical affiliation was unclear. He was forced to swallow, still undecided as to which state he was thereby spitting into. Just then, the ant returned, and Aris swallowed again out of vexation that it had not appeared sooner and helped him choose.

His fingers released. A sound wave traveled along the bowstring. A rustle was born and died. The air gave a clink. Aris exhaled. There was no need to verify the hit: Aris, a charron of the highest order, felt a magnificent shot in his very skin. Today it had been magnificent. But instruction was instruction. He raised his spyglass.

A spasm wrenched his gut. The arrow was lodged in a tree. Not in the door. In a tree beyond the property line. Alarm paralyzed him. A charron's error is not mere faulty work; it is a diplomatic scandal. Aris doubled over, staring at the ground. Rivulets crawled across the stones.

And then he saw the impossible. All the water was flowing in one direction. Toward his own country. Every last drop. In dead calm.

The border had vanished. Aris envied the wind. Air could cross the crest without paying duty. The poor charron was pinned to the earth by gravitation and law. His very breath had become contraband. Of their own accord, words learned by rote in school from the Code of Three Inviolable Formularies came out in a half-whisper: "Where ridges part the waters left and right, there stands the customs house—sole toll for power's might. Sole…"

Water, like all things, obeys weight—downward. With no less inevitability, the force of Coriole shoves things sideways from the axis of the World. Two forces, always two.

Weight, it seemed, still lived. Coriole—did not.

Aris searched his body for a reaction, a hint of vertigo. For if from birth you live within the sly and springy crosswind of existence, then a sudden calm ought to knock certain elemental spirits of your organism off their paths. But no. His step was steady. Perhaps the sterility of equilibrium was the result of a fear that had wiped away all fluctuation with its ruthless iron brush.

The event did not shatter Aris's thought-action, but it shifted the assemblage point of his perception, relocating his "I" from inside the familiar skull to the outside. In the first minutes, being a witness to himself was unendurable.

Aris wanted to rub the bridge of his nose, but realized he could not recall where his face was. His hand found his nose, but he was touching a warm effigy.

He vomited. He vomited up the absence of both today's breakfast and yesterday's supper.

He vomited up himself.

His left shoulder grew heavier than his right, as if someone who knew the ending had perched there. On the outside, the world proved to be honest, cold, and dead. But Aris had not chosen honesty! He did not begrudge his own head, which had ceased to be an aquarium wherein the source of his gaze swam. He did not begrudge his own body, which had suddenly become a suit worn by someone

else. Yet it seemed to him that this someone, or something, knew how to walk through fire. The stones underfoot ceased to be stones, reborn as objects of the "stone" type.

He ran along the former spine of the world. Gravel flew from under his boots. The keel of his chest cut the air with unaccustomed smoothness, like the tip of a swift arrow. All three elements—solid, liquid, and volatile—grew confused and merged. The spirals of tree trunks appeared ever more frequently. He maneuvered. His feet kept landing wrong upon the earth.

Aris finally stumbled so badly that he deemed it wise to drop to a walk, for what drove him was not an urgent duty, but merely an eternal dread in the face of broken physics. "Or-der," he finally spat out the word, which had lost all meaning.

It seemed to him: a step left—one fate, a step right—another. And he possessed no will to choose. He thanked the heavens only that for now, he did not have to decide which nostril to breathe through.

⁂

Aris needed a real, living witness. A witness is "one who witnessed." The concept —witness—was gradually taking shape in his head as he hurried toward the homestead. It was the sole structure on the vast heath, and there was hope of finding someone inside who could bear witness. In the twenty-seven years of Aris's life, of which he remembered twenty-one clearly, this was the first time he had been forced to construct this cognitive object into a concrete semantic, linguistic form. O, diligent Forebears! A witness. Would you believe it. He needed one who had also witnessed. Incredible! Usually... no, what "usually"—always... always, a simple indication had sufficed, that is, a simple indication of a fact by the one who speaks. He indicated—it was seen. But now that was not enough.

"Phenomenology, jurisprudence, epistemology, hermeneutics, semiotics, proxemics," he muttered. None of it was right, none of it.

He was moving from east to west, and therefore the terrain sagged maximally under the beam of his sight. What he saw, the place that was his goal, was closer to his gaze than to his legs, which were already growing tangled with fatigue. The eye is deceived by distances, and many lack a lifetime in which to learn how to determine the direction of movement without sight, by the feel of their feet. But the body and eye of an archer of this class are not so easily fooled. The charron expected a trick here too, from a physics that had betrayed the world, but no—

the firmament of the earth did not fail him. The charron verified with his own legs that only Coriole, the inertia of lateral displacement, had vanished. The shape of the Great Cylinder of the earth remained unscathed.

Having gained this certainty, Aris began to act more calmly and rationally. Consequently, he decided to do nothing.

This, too, proved difficult.

He sat down in a field planted with artichokes. He thought he might walk between the rows of the crop, not wasting strength on constant clambering over tussocks. The lines, curving smoothly along the hill, neatly hilled by the careful hoes of laborers, naturally repeated the influence of Coriole. "Now that Coriole has perished, one could make the rows of plants as straight as a beam of light. What a marvel,"—his thought spiraled in a naïve loop—"Will tree trunks now be as straight as blood sausage?" The pause had its effect. He stood, brushed the clods of soil from his trousers, and continued on his way.

The arc of the field led him somewhat aside, but he soon found himself on a service farm track that quickly brought him to the gates of the homestead. Aris hesitated briefly beside the bell-pull swinging in the wind, the one used to summon the gatekeeper or other servants, but he did not ring. After a certain wavering, he resolved to compound his professional blunder of missing the mark with an administrative infraction. Aris headed for the tree into which the hapless arrow had embedded itself, to retrieve the message.

The arrow was stuck high up. Perhaps three standard human heights above the ground. Having propped his long bow—which was by now quite tiresome against his heels—against the tree, Aris made for a group of domestic giraffes grazing nearby. Quickly finding a common language with one of them, he led the gentle creature to the tree and climbed, using its obligingly offered flank to reach its croup and then its neck. The arrow and message were in his hands. He sank himself even deeper into the mire of crime by covering the arrow's mark with bits of bark.

⁂

The door opened at once—as if they had been waiting behind it. A servant, judging by the quality of his livery a majordomo, conducted the charron into a reception room without any questions. Aris's service robe, bearing the status patch "charron" over his heart, had done its work. A rare position, and one not devoid of respect. On the majordomo's chest, Aris noticed with surprise and

pleasure a coat of arms that matched the hallmark on his spyglass. This was the homestead not of a pettifogger, but of a powerful clan of opticians. The majordomo's well-groomed appearance stood in some contrast to a strange disorder in the courtyard, which was softened by the large decorative pumpkins growing here and there. Aris could not help but notice heaps of fabric, beams, and other construction debris. He attached no significance to it, attributing all oddities to his own "displaced gaze."

Aris noted with immense pleasure that the man gave not a single hint—by half-glance or other cue—that Aris's deformity had made any impression upon him whatsoever. The charron passed his hand with resigned acceptance over his unnaturally narrow chest, which jutted out like a hound's ribcage. In his situation, any acquaintance always began with just such a note: had the new interlocutor managed to entirely conceal his surprise and revulsion, or not?

The majordomo, leaving Aris to wait, informed him that the sole representative of the master's family present was the optician Jinngo. He would certainly come down to greet the guest as soon as he was able. The majordomo promised that fragrant tea would be served shortly, and withdrew.

Aris did not have to wait. With a flash of a red cloak, a very young man appeared in the room. Tall, with an affable, lively face.

"Optician Jinngo at your service," he glinted with a half-bow and spoke with formal correctness: "I shall not conceal my interest in your visit, inasmuch as I myself consider the remoteness of our dwelling from the city a regrettable inconvenience, and consequently I rate the likelihood of the circumstances that brought you to us being of an unusual nature as extremely high."

The charron immediately set forth the essence of his intention, departing no less from the protocols of formal speech:

"Charron Aris, pleased to make your acquaintance. I am experiencing a need for the immediate conducting of an experiment, and also for the presence of a witness," said Aris, preparing the ground for the second of the three obligatory components of a rejoinder.

Formal language was no burden, owing to a habit formed over a lifetime. Nor was it a joy.

"I direct my request precisely to you, since there are no other people nearby, and the matter, in my view, brooks no delay," Aris stated the inalienable personal motive behind the utterance, obligatory in any formal rejoinder.

"I evaluate the gravity of the subject under discussion as extremely high, a fact indicated at the very least by my being forced to do so under extremely unpleasant attendant circumstances," the charron concluded with a sigh, delivering the third and final obligatory component of the rejoinder.

Aris pressed his hand to his chest in the standard gesture of sincerity, fully aware that on his torso, which bulged in all the wrong places, it looked comical at best. Jinngo, however, gave not the slightest ground for suspecting any display of contempt for a physiological deformity. He smiled broadly and proposed:

"Let's dispense with the formal 'you.' I can see how everything is burning inside you. I see the arrow under the flap of your cloak. I understand that you were not here by chance in the first place—my old man's business. But he's away now," Jinngo winked cheerfully, flopping with full force into an armchair. "So it's his own fault if he misses the most interesting part. Why not? With formal speech, we won't get far fast."

Aris exhaled with relief, nodded, and also sat down, placing the arrow with the letter upon the low table before the armchairs. All this time he had been standing. Fragrant tea was served.

⁂

At the charron's request, the optician gave orders—a servant filled a large tub with water. When the bottom plug was opened and the liquid began to drain downward in a laminar flow, Aris pointed a finger at the drain:

"There's no whirlpool. Coriole has perished."

Jinngo shifted his widened eyes a couple of times from the charron to the tub and back. He bent forward slightly, as if counting something in an invisible purse. The charron looked upon the rich scion with pity—the man was contorted by an unwillingness to behave in accordance with the situation. It seemed to Aris that someone inside the optician, someone more honest, wanted to leap out and start howling from sheer horror. Yet the glassy merriment of the eyes of fortune's pampered darling would not release him. The optician found an outlet for his own tension; he turned to the servant:

"Hey, Card-Panso! Don't you want to take a look?"

"Absolutely not, Optician Jinngo. I would rather not," came the reply from beyond the door.

"Why so?" the optician pressed.

"My father said one ought not to pay attention to the imperfections of the world."

"Why ever not?"

"My father said that Avertigus lives by the relations of people. The more turbulent they are, the swifter His thought," said Card-Panso.

"How do you mean?"

"You wouldn't spoil your day off by going to a tedious play, would you, esteemed Optician? Truly?"

It is unknown how long the attempts of Optician Jinngo to enlist another witness might have continued, but just then a gossamer waterspout appeared in the tub, swiftly transforming into the customary, jauntily dancing vortex.

"Wait, let me think..." Jinngo muttered.

"Precisely!" said Aris. "It was always there. Always. Then it vanished. Now it is back! Let us make sure."

The charron darted for the exit with an impulsiveness unlike himself, dragging the optician after him with an impatient gesture. Outside, he drew an ordinary war arrow from his quiver, pointed at a lone tree standing a couple of hundred paces off, and swiftly loosed the shot. The optician followed the arc of flight with open mouth. The arrow, describing a typical Coriolic trajectory, lodged itself precisely in the center of the trunk with a note of 'thwack.'

"Whoa-z," Jinngo whistled in the same chord. "You're a master, Aris! I had you pegged as the sluggish type, not to say a bit slow."

The charron allowed the praise to freshen his face. He blinked.

"It's restored," he said. "Coriole lives again. But you were witness to its temporary death. And it seems you took it far easier than I did."

They returned to the rooms under the suspicious gaze of the majordomo. He nonetheless poured tea into their cups with perfect discipline.

"What do you need a witness for?" the optician no longer knew what to be more astonished at. "It's the first time I've met a person who does not rely sufficiently on his own word. You're surely not one of those rare fallen firmabider whose firmament has been shattered. No one would have suspected you of distorting reality, as a person who simply lacks the skill of lying."

"I am, in fact, not certain that it should be spoken of at all," said Aris quietly, almost in a whisper. "I feel it is a matter of supreme importance, but I cannot explain why."

"I know who can!" the optician blurted out immediately.

⁂

His optimism had not suffered from the mystery of the occurrence.

"A suitable thought has visited me. Let's go."

Jinngo began to bustle about. "What an incongruous witness," Aris thought.

"Saddle two," the optician called to the servant, while he himself quickly fetched a shoulder bag, donned a baldric, put on a hat, threw on a cloak with his clan's embroidery, and stared at the charron:

"What are you dithering for? Hungry, or what?"

"Well, there's this..." Aris mumbled, nodding at the arrow with the letter.

"Ah, that," Jinngo waved it off lightheartedly. "Shoot it into the door, and there's an end to it."

"It must look as though it came from afar," the charron objected on a purely technical level.

"Well then, calculate the force," Jinngo replied with bewilderment. He stood in a pose of indignant expectation. One leg of his wide-bottomed trousers blazed with impatience—the optician was literally tapping his heel.

The charron stepped into the middle of the courtyard, drew his bow... but balked.

"I cannot," he admitted. "A brazen lie by deed."

"Fetch the brace and the fine bit, Card-Panso," Jinngo then barked at the majordomo. When the man appeared in the yard with the tool, he ordered: "Drill exactly in the middle of the door, at a slight downward angle, about thirteen degrees. There. Now sink the arrow into it. Just so. Twist it a little. Excellent. You're an accomplice now. Understood, Card-Panso?"

Jinngo smiled carefreely at both the majordomo and the charron, and then briskly vaulted onto the already saddled giraffe.

⁂

Charron Aris, however, had by this point recovered his composure. He reassessed the situation. His new acquaintance, ready to race off somewhere this very minute, was frankly ridiculous. Perhaps the sobering up was aided by the fact that, one way or another, the charron's work was done. Yes, improperly. Yet, it was done. With consequences or without, it was nonetheless done.

At present, the difficulty of the position lay in two things. Firstly, it was extremely desirable to eat and rest. On that score, the optician had guessed correctly. Secondly, he wished to observe and ponder the problem of his perception's misalignment. Both of these circumstances prompted the charron to devise something to tell the optician so that he would postpone the departure until tomorrow morning. Or better—until lunchtime. Aris tried to catch the majordomo's eye as an ally. It didn't work. Card-Panso, it was plain, had been trained by years, if not decades, of non-interference.

Well then, the only thing left to say was what required the lowest EER of lieving — the least expenditure of energy:

"Jinngo, you're a kind fellow, but I'm deathly tired. Put it off till morning."

"You're not falling ill, are you?" he asked, more insinuatingly than sympathetically.

"I don't think… no," Aris replied.

"Good. With the initiative given, obeying is no hardship. Unsaddle them then, Card-Panso. Sorry for the extra work. Do you play 'zarchess,' Aris? We'll eat, then play."

⁂

"Listen, Aris," Jinngo's face tensed, "forgive my impertinence. But could you, say… well… have missed?"

The charron took no offense.

"Someone who is not an archer himself wouldn't understand: the treacherous misty air always remains low on the surface of the Great Cylinder, below the chord connecting the archer and his target."

"Above the chord, the atmosphere can be deceptively clear?"

"Yes! But the mist is tenacious! It doesn't hinder the gaze, but it ruins the arrow's flight. Therefore, 'mind the direction of the world's rotation!'—so my mentors said. An arrow flies in an arc. Depending on the world's rotation, the inertia of

Coriole will force the arrow to dip in the middle section or, conversely, to rise temporarily. 'Attention,' we were taught, 'below lies humidity; there the resistance to the arrow's flight is different'..."

"I understand, I understand," said Jinngo, casting the dice. "Who are your parents, Aris?"

Jinngo asked this as casually as it was possible to do so. Had the charron replied three minutes later, in the present context it would still have sounded acceptable and appropriate.

"They were always civil servants, never wealthy. Now I am alone, but there is no one to blame save a whole series of disparate misadventures and accidents."

"Different kinds of civil servants? Not only charrons?"

"There were querists... Various, yes."

"But always the sort whose service it's best not to speak of, right?"

"It appears so."

The optician turned the game board half a circle and began setting up the playing pieces anew. He had won the first game. The charron, meanwhile, was scrutinizing his own sensations. He was distracted by a childish thought that if he saw from the side, he could shoot like no one else. But he did not see from the side. It was his perspective that was distorted. And not consistently.

"Well, and what of your Line? Always, in all ages—opticians?"

"To the extent that I am aware—yes," Jinngo said without enthusiasm. "Insipid people. You saw for yourself: even the majordomo was chosen to match. A man who voluntarily refuses to look upon a miracle, can you imagine?"

"It seemed to me like religious caution."

"Nonsense," Jinngo rejected that supposition. "The devout honor the precepts exclusively in the abstract. Until the heat is on."

Aris had an explanation, but he could not voice it: if he, a charron, had suffered a strangeness of consciousness, then others too might have received a blow to their reason. A blow of a different sort. Perhaps no less absurd than his shifting displacement of perspective.

The slow theological conversation flowed smoothly. The charron relaxed, lost a little money to the optician, and then simply fell asleep, right there on the sofa where he sat.

His sleep unfolded in a normal perspective. Moreover, the charron did not remember the dream. The majordomo, as night drew on, began tidying up in the yard, producing no small amount of noise. The optician started pacing the house, also generating noise, but now through arguing with the majordomo. The displaced perspective of his gaze whispered to Aris that in this house-in-the-remote-sticks, there had never been individuals who were simultaneously sovereign and adult. Except, perhaps, for some of the giraffes.

¶

Fragment 20. Defects in the Solid: The Advent of Prithrea

¶

Two giraffes with their riders trotted down from the crest of the watershed along a winding gravel path at a brisk amble. The phlegmatic world was once more habitually divided into three hypostases—firmament, water, and air. On the smooth sides of river cobbles, the remnants of the recent rain glistened. Through hundreds of portal-mirrors, the stones observed the riders from below. The travelers, however, did not ponder what force had carried this gravel so far from the river. The long compensating springs in the saddle that had fallen to the charron's lot squeaked mercilessly with each step of each of the enormous animal's four legs.

The travelers, on the whole, ignored the solid road surface; they were occupied with the volatile element. At first, while the descent was steep, the riders could think of nothing else, constantly clearing their ears with powerful exhalations, their noses pinched tight with their fingers. The air grew denser with every step. The pressure was more than unpleasant. However, the slope soon eased its gradient, and bodily torment gave way to languor of the mind.

"Hunger can be sated, ambition—buried, fear of death—overcome by asceticism. But if you remove the question 'what if?', you remove not a function, but the very self. Curiosity is not a desire; it is a form of existence," the charron engaged in silent self-justification, measuring each word by the squeak of a spring.

Jinngo, for the most part, did not share the charron's difficulties, whistling a fashionable hit tune. The young optician rode along, swaying rhythmically beneath the flame of the wavering plumes on his hat. The mechanisms of his saddle were adjusted and lubricated, which, evidently, denied him the necessary foundation for self-examination. Perhaps Card-Panso's selective care for the saddles was not the result of simple oversight.

Aris's curiosity suddenly ground with a defect. The long, flexible necks were to blame. Riding a giraffe, positioned in the space between the croup and the base of the neck, one can find oneself at various angles to the ground. There is none of the verticality that a rider of, say, a horse might boast of. At a certain moment,

by sheer chance, the poor heads of Aris and Jinngo aligned in a single line with the displaced point of perspective, whose hovering somewhere behind and above the charron had already grown accustomed to. Now that rapier, from which the skewed vector of perception protruded, impaled Jinngo's consciousness as well. The rapier's cunning knew no bounds—its very tip could bend and fold like a penknife, so as not to let its skewered victim slip through fine-tuning. Directly inside Aris's head there now sat three: he himself—a stranger to himself, Jinngo, and Cause itself, holding the dreadful rapier in its hand. These three clamored in a brawl:

"Wha' we draggin' this tail of Two fer? Scared for yer profession?"

"Yeah! Why six? Need three… cubed."

"How's that… lookin' back at the Old One?"

"Self-sufficiency. Contemplarium! Contempla…"

"It loves self—enough."

The voices mingled, and Aris began to slide from the saddle, losing his grip. He clutched his bow, with unclear intent. Instant relief was granted by the world itself. A gap of rare magnitude opened in the clouds. This turned a page in the book of Aris's personal time. His pulse continued to throb for some time in the palm that gripped the trusty weapon. Jinngo, as Aris now perceived him, was bending his spine now left, now right, as if trying to shrug off a frock coat that was too tight.

Within the titanic cylinder of the world, vast spaces became visible: days of travel, perhaps a sennight. Below, in the fertile valley of the River, two cities darkened in chaotic growths. A multitude of villages and hamlets.

The young men admired the view. Such a sight never grows tiresome. All the more so because the revolting effect of his own gaze, hanging somewhere behind his left shoulder, receded before this magnificent vista. When Aris looked into the depths of the world, everything was as before. Naturally, he chose to remain silent about the hallucination. He decided to anchor the returning sensation of solid reality by asking a down-to-earth question.

"Don't you know, Jinngo, why the diameter of the world is precisely this, 357 chiliads of steps? Why the period of rotation is 1246 heartbeats?" Aris asked the optician loudly from a distance, not risking steering his mount closer. "Just to have a pretty combination of numbers?"

The optician's parents, the charron could assume, would not have skimped on tutors. And Jinngo exceeded his companion's expectations:

"I do know, imagine that," the optician replied, riding up close to Aris. The animals immediately halted as if rooted to the spot and entwined their necks. "The version in the textbooks doesn't sit well with you either? All they can do is write 'chiliad' for pomp, when for the non-vegetative it should be 'thousand.' Is Avertigus a plant, then?"

Seizing the halt, the travelers took out their spyglasses.

"I confess, I don't even know that version," Aris said modestly. With a practiced motion, he extended his telescopic three-segment glass. It gave a solid click in its locking grooves.

"Oh, brother, how did you ever rise to the rank of charron?" Jinngo marveled, artlessly and not very politely. "It is textbook wisdom that in the world of the Creators' Makers, the diameter… how shall I put it, was a 'round' number. A hundred, I believe. And when translated into our units, it became an absurdity. The textbook authors, by the way, saw nothing beautiful in 1246 and 357, unlike you."

"Why do you call them the Creators' Makers? Everyone simply says—the Forebears."

"I am precise," a smug smile never left Optician Jinngo's face. "But textbooks are rubbish. Here's what I overheard in my old man's study. The head of the healers' clan was telling him…"

The optician recounted the healer's theory in a rather jumbled fashion. From what was said, Aris grasped only that the dimensions of the world were chosen so that the force of gravity at sea level matched that of the Forebears, and the density of air at the summit of the Great Mountain was four and a half times lower than at the bottom.

"Why four and a…" the charron did not manage to finish the question.

"Because an even greater difference cannot be withstood, what's unclear about that? You'd suffocate, or, on the contrary, something inside would rupture, the bramble only knows. I've been neither to the summit nor to the mouth."

"Even this difference is hard to bear. Forgive me," said Aris.

"Well. Depends on the person. I've heard there are capable folk. As for the numbers, forget it. Mere chance. Let me take a look at your glass, rather. Ooh, how

fine. Our house's workmanship. Last century, even. Only forty-seven of these were made. Still haven't sold them all. No bubbles or gaseous inclusions, no striae. Minimal residual stresses. No crystallites. Excellent melting and fining. A most worthy instrument."

The focus of his attention darted across the rare spyglass swiftly and confidently, like a flautist's fingers. He pressed and probed the mechanical joints. Drawing an enormous silk handkerchief from his pocket, he unfurled it with a professional flourish. While the optician wiped the lenses, the clan's hallmark embroidered in the corner hypnotized Aris. After this, Jinngo showed no intention of returning the instrument. He began twirling it in one hand like a juggler, causing the charron a certain nervousness.

"Your father must be proud of you," Aris forced out. "You know your family's trade."

"Ha! Are you mocking me? He calls me nothing but defective. I love gazing into the distance. The large things. And yet what? Meanwhile, nearly all the money is made in minikin glasswork. Tiny seals on documents, you know? Of course you know," he interrupted himself with a slap on the charron's thigh. The optician, at last, returned Aris's glass to him. "You've got one on your bow yourself. A professional instrument, strictly licensed."

"I thought the income was roughly split down the middle," Aris said in surprise. "Or rather, I never thought about it at all, but had I posed the question..."

"What a naive soul you are! And an archer, at that. The revenue from the instruments themselves is one hundredth of the whole. The main thing is all sorts of licenses, the right to verification. The stamp, the hallmark, pah! Pettifoggery. And worse, even. Well, let's ride on," Jinngo unceremoniously tapped his own spyglass against the nose of Aris's giraffe. The animal shied back. The optician collapsed the instrument in one lightning motion and stowed it in his bosom. The charron barely kept his seat, but the compensating mechanisms, despite their screeching, did their job.

A short while later they arrived at a fork. Left—Mishitzbattleban. Right—Volmelftstein. The charron, without a second thought, rode right.

"We're going to Mishitzbattleban, friend," Jinngo smirked. The plumes on his hat performed a brief dance of scorn.

"But... I live in Volmelftstein, by the will of the Forebears..." Aris mumbled.

Yet it was impossible to refuse—after all, he had availed himself of hospitality the previous day. "The bramble take it," Aris thought. "Now I'll be stuck even longer. Could it be he agreed so readily yesterday just to ensnare me today with that hint of unspoken things? My mentor did say: never switch to informal address with those you've met through service."

"I live on the watershed crest myself, so what of it..." Jinngo was saying meanwhile. "Come on, turn around. You, I see, are a stickler and a formalist, a grouch and a pedant. You pedant over empty trifles. Just like my old man."

"This won't end well," the charron passed silent judgment on yet another defect of these days, and turned after the optician, continuing what was now an inevitable catabasis.

⁂

By the time they reached the immediate outskirts of the city, evening was drawing on.

The city was separated from the world by a wall with towers and an imposing moat that might be mistaken for a river. Indeed, it was a diversion canal of the river. The enormous stones comprising the bridge across the moat breathed solidity. The bridge itself, as wide as a city building, arched for a hundred paces. Owing to its considerable width, the bridge pressed the voids above the water, between a dozen mighty supports, into deep shadow.

Given the strict entry regime, many visitors preferred to conduct trade without attempting to enter the city. Thus, an extensive suburb had formed before the moat. The authorities did not permit permanent settlement here, but there was a great multitude of substantial tents housing taverns and shops. Here, dried fish. There, mushrooms. Yonder, pumpkins. There was even a pawnshop, where a shameful display window showed off family necklaces, worn barter-devices, outerwear, harnesses, books, and other sundry valuables. A postman-pigeoneer wandered among the rows, bored. The sole permanent building was a temporary shelter for riding animals. None, save donkeys, were admitted within the city walls.

In the shelter were all the riding animals Aris even knew to exist. Expensive, swift-footed ostriches. Sturdy workhorses. Giant dogs tolerant of snow. There were even moose, indispensable for the coniferous forests of the rivermouth territories.

"One can only envy the breadth of the city's trade connections," Jinngo observed. "Only pterodactyls are lacking."

"Are they harnessed too?" Aris wondered.

"Why not harness one, if you can catch it," the optician jested.

Aris and Jinngo safely stabled the gentle beasts in neighboring stalls and gave them feed, but a hitch arose upon exiting. The charron paid the fee, but Optician Jinngo turned out to have no money.

"Father doesn't give me any," he lowered his gaze. And added with a sigh: "A long story. I'll tell it. For now: pay for me, friend Aris, if you'd be so kind. I'll repay you."

It was no trouble for the charron to bail out his companion. He refrained from pointing out that the optician at least had his winnings from the previous night. Though, that could well have already been lost to the majordomo.

They stepped out onto the bridge.

"Shall we grab a bite?" the charron suggested. He pointed his friend toward a hospitable-looking green tent with a tavern inside.

"Let's eat in the city, in a more decent place. Surely you can endure a bit," the optician urged him toward the bridge nonetheless.

"Besides, we ought to look around before passing the guards," Aris cautiously ventured. "Listen in. Take a gander at the texts on the barter-devices. We can't be the only ones stirred up. Surely, right? What if the city authorities impose some special regime. And we're nearly without money, without lodgings."

The optician's face soured.

"We'll get stuck. Aren't you expected home tomorrow?" the charron insisted, mustering his courage.

In addressing the optician informally, the charron had the opportunity to omit his main worry from his remarks: what if the majordomo had informed on him via pigeoneer, and now he, Aris, was wanted for official misconduct. He assigned low odds both to the disloyalty of the optician clan's servant, and to the presence in that backwater of pigeoneers authorized to send formal post. But still. And hunger gnawed at him mercilessly.

"Everything will be fine. Come on," Jinngo persisted. "Zoho-zoho."

"As fine as when paying for the stabling?" the charron was forced into outright cheek.

"Alright, you've persuaded me. Where we dine—I choose," the optician said without irritation, even cheerfully. He immediately headed for an establishment where patrons sat on high three-legged stools around a gigantic vat. A thick, dark pottage that scented the whole area simmered in the cauldron. The cook, who also appeared to be the proprietor, served everyone using a ladle with a handle as long as a man is tall.

"This is certainly more decent," thought the Charron, who usually preferred food prepared in individual small iron pots. But he naturally chose not to object. He reckoned Optician Jinngo's choice was dictated by the fact that, viewed from above, this tavern looked as round as a lens.

⁂

The folk at the pre-bridge fair were well-mannered, yet there were those who proved unable to conceal a surprised glance or even a smirk at the sight of Aris's ribcage. But that was not the reason the charron could not dine in peace. Seated across from them was a girl he had seen a couple of times on the streets of his native Volmelftstein. The first time had been some three years ago, but since then not an evening had passed when, retiring to sleep, he had not devoted a thought or two to her. The stolen glances and the gamut of feelings on Aris's face did not escape the selective attentiveness of the optician. He neither stayed idle nor pondered overlong, but addressed the girl directly:

"My friend has fallen in love with you. I say this solely out of a desire that he not ruin his life for nothing, and I consider this statement of mine thicketly serious," he delivered the formally correct phrase.

The girl merely smiled in response. Pleasantly, perhaps. That is, if one did not approach the assessment of mimetic communication too strictly. She looked ravishing. The gaze from behind his left shoulder spoiled everything except her and the distant heavens.

"But lest you grow conceited, I shall add that he had a chance this morning to witness a marvel no less wondrous, with all due respect to your beauty," Jinngo pressed on, supplementing his rejoinder with a verbatim repetition of the categories of intent and personal evaluation, thereby neutralizing their import.

The girl, without saying a word, rose from her seat. It turned out she had been sitting not on a stool like the rest, but on a barrel organ stood on end. She

walked around the enormous vat and seated herself one spot away from the companions, next to Aris. Likewise—on her barrel organ. The stool that had been there an instant before flew into the corner of the tent from a precise nudge of an orange boot. Notably, it landed on its legs.

"I've seen you before too," she nodded and sniffed the air with suspicion. It was unclear whether she had seen the optician, the charron, or both. The girl brazenly disdained the necessity of formalizing her utterance, as if the laws of language were softer for her than for others.

"Informal address?" the optician immediately proposed, glancing around suspiciously. Strictly speaking, switching to informal address would require an explanation, some mitigating circumstance, should a culture patrol be nearby.

"And who are you?" Prithrea asked. This time it was perfectly clear she was addressing the optician. "My name is Prithrea."

"Optician Jinngo."

"A good optician?"

"The very best!" declared the optician, who, owing to youth, had not yet come to know himself.

"Look, I'm inclined to believe people," Prithrea warned. "The best it is, then. Well? Tell your tale."

The optician introduced his companion and quickly, perhaps even too quickly, recounted only what he had seen with his own eyes—the experiment with the bathtub. Prithrea did not attempt to ascertain why two young men had needed to fill and drain water in the morning, though in all of Illumiros one would hardly find a person who attended to their toilet upon waking rather than in the evening before sleep.

"Have you seen a lantern go out?" she said, not in the least surprised by the tale. "First it's bright, then—now and then, it flickers. And then—it's done. Your bathtub was the first flicker."

Prithrea attended to her meal while the lads looked at her uncomprehendingly.

"It's a dislocation," she took pity after a while. "You say the whirlpool was gone for a few instants?"

The optician nodded falsely. The charron remained silent. Prithrea explained:

"It's a kind of hump inside the universe. A fold that runs through the solid, making it shift but not break."

At the word "hump," the charron's heart skipped a beat. In his inner thoughts, he considered his deformity a hump that had, for some reason, migrated to the front of his torso from the back, where it resides on all relatively normal, albeit few, people—hunchbacks. His hump, it seemed, took on a life of its own in those minutes. Any moment now it would put on its own separate frock coat.

"Didn't understand a groat," Jinngo admitted meanwhile. He nudged Aris with his elbow: "You understand?"

Aris could not utter a word.

"Have you seen a caterpillar crawl?" the girl expounded. "It doesn't move its little legs one by one, like a person. It compresses into a concertina, creates a hump on its back, and that hump flows from tail to head. Stone or iron, when forged with a hammer, behaves just like a caterpillar. Invisible, minute folds run through its interior. Only thanks to this does an iron strip lengthen, become longer, without crumbling to dust."

Prithrea ceased her explanations. She had clearly grown bored. She sniffed the air, showing unease.

"I see," said the optician with understanding. "If not for these 'caterpillars,' iron would be harder than glass, and when the smith struck with his hammer—it would shatter, like my glass."

He patted his family crest on his right breast not without pride.

Just then, some fellow plopped himself down heavily on the stool between Aris and Prithrea. He leered brazenly at the girl, not even having had time to set his plate on the circular counter that served as a common table. Then a strange thing happened, a worthy addition, in the charron's eyes, to today's necklace of universal defects. The girl took the man by the elbow, and an instant later he changed his sitting posture for a standing one, a good three paces away from them. Had he merely flown onto his back in the dust of the packed earth beneath the tent, it could have been chalked up to a successful pain-compliance technique.

The optician did not notice this fold in the flow of the world, owing to its brevity.

"Farewell, lads," said the girl, and was gone. Where the barrel organ had stood, a deep imprint remained, as if the music box weighed as much as a draft horse.

⁂

The charron walked across the bridge, rejoicing that he now had a hundred times more visual material for his pre-sleep reveries. And not only visual. "Do you think metal and stone are dead?" he fabricated words unspoken by Prithrea. "No. Within them live invisible stone serpents. These are dislocations. When a smith or stonemason strikes with a hammer, he wakes these serpents. They begin to stir within, rearranging the pattern of the material. If the serpents crawl in unison—metal bends, becomes a sword or a plow. If the serpent is cornered or killed by sudden cooling, the material becomes angry and hard. But most importantly—brittle."

The reveries of secrets of soft power and cunning crack-folds were clouded by fatigue. Or perhaps—by envy of that hapless brute who had been moved like a pawn on a game board. The day was shaping up as badly as possible. The day was shaping up as wonderfully as possible. The day was shaping up in folds.

The wall and the checkpoint ahead jutted out as defects in the terrain. The boundary between "chaotic extra-mural here" and "ordered intra-mural there" looked demanding. For the burgomaster and his retinue, this had a literal meaning—maintaining such a solid structure against decay truly required a constant expenditure of resources.

⁂

At the checkpoint, all visitors surrendered their weapons for temporary storage unless they were licensed. A considerable fee was levied for this. In fairness, it must be noted that the burgomaster imposed duties on neither guests nor goods. The charron presented his bow; the guard checked the minikin-mark on the steel part where the string was held using a minikin glass, and admitted Aris into the city. The charron lingered by the doors, waiting for the optician to pass, and thereupon a squabble erupted.

The charron could make out few words, but the gist of the conflict was clear. The optician's rapier lacked the required hallmark, against which the optician fiercely advanced the legally untenable argument that he himself was an optician. Pointing out that the guards' minikin glass bore the same hallmark as the optician's cloak did not help. The bulk of the words, however, consisted of explicit curses and insults. From both sides.

A guard not involved in the squabble looked at the charron. His gaze shifted.

"He's with some freak, too," he nodded in the charron's direction.

In half an instant, the charron found himself inside the conflict, physically. And the conflict itself turned into a fistfight. Something smelling of sweat and onion crashed into his cheekbone.

"Ah, you freak!" a boot jabbed at the charron, who was already sprawled on the floor. Under the ribs—where his chest grotesquely jutted out beneath his frock coat. Other boots came to assist. Notably, with similar insults. The real essence of people manifests most readily in borderline situations. While the charron had undergone the customs procedure, no one had expressed any contempt. But it had been within them, as it turned out. Worst of all was that Aris observed this scene, moreover, from the side.

A fairly short while later, the companions were sitting in a stone niche behind a grating of thick steel bars. A couple of hours later they dozed off. It had long since grown dark. No one intended to disturb the captain of the guard from his family affairs until morning. As became clear a little later, there was a saving grace to this. The charron's professional licensed weapon was not confiscated—the low-ranking functionaries feared overstepping their authority.

⁂

"Psst, lads..." a loud whisper woke them.

Prithrea stood outside the grating. The barrel organ hung from a strap on her back.

"I'm gonna take a dig now, and after that, don't you dawdle—run right, there's an alley. Wait for me there, I'll need to tidy up," she sniffled and spat juicily into the dry dust.

They had no time to find out either what "take a dig" meant, or what sort of tidying up she had in mind. Prithrea took hold of one of the bars as if it were the haft of a shovel. And then she truly dug. As with a shovel. The metal gave a liquid squeak, like clay. The entire grating, including fragments of stone walls, floor, and ceiling, rotated as if cut from soft butter. Prithrea set this structure, with its unappetizing architectural and constructional entrails, aside so the young men could exit, and gestured for them to vanish.

⁂

Aris ran. Prithrea had surpassed her image, and her image had surpassed itself. Thinking of her now was unbearable. The charron thought of himself. He thought of himself as incandescent metal. He was a sword blank dipped not merely in water, but in icy brine. Somewhere down there, in the deltas of the Rivers, where it gets very cold. Aris now knew from somewhere that this imparted a hardness the world had never seen.

The lads, trying to catch their breath, stood in a narrow alley. As usual, the full Moon shone from the northwest. They did not speak. The wait was not long. When the girl appeared, the optician stepped forward:

"Optician Jinngo at your service," Jinngo bowed.

His companion followed suit:

"Charron Aris at your service," Aris bowed.

The girl said:

"At my service? Archer, see the clock on the town hall? Here's an arrow for you," she handed Aris a long arrow, whose head gleamed a bluish-black. "Pin the long, thin hand for me."

Aris looked at the tower, some five hundred paces distant. Aris's nature chose to consider that all top-qualified archers in the city were accounted for by the gatekeepers' inspection of minikin-marks. He hesitated.

"Alright then. And I—am lectotype Prithrea," said Prithrea. "I offer no services."

¶

Fragment 21. Stress Tensor: Skirmish, Oath, and the Hunt for Clocks

¶

The spot occupied by Prithrea's chiseled figure in Aris's field of vision was shrinking. The explanation was simple: the girl, with the barrel organ on her back, was walking away at a calm pace. The barrel organ did not sway in the slightest, but glided smoothly above the ground, as if the girl were strapped to it as a passenger who, though graceful, was shifting her little legs across the earth entirely uselessly.

Aris placed Prithrea's arrow in his quiver and watched her go. He craned his neck unnaturally, much as birds do when aiming their eye, which juts out from the exact middle of their head, at prey or danger. Aris suddenly felt happy. He opened and closed his palms several times, as if kneading the gentle indifference of the world toward him. He no longer feared the inevitable cascade of troubles turning into catastrophe. In his intoxication with this new form of freedom, he now needed a spectator. His fall—worthy fuel for a triumph. That was roughly what he thought, but he said (raising his voice slightly to bridge the distance to Prithrea) more simply:

"We'll have our smile yet!"

A faint echo—the sound "yet"—bounced between the walls of the narrow alley. The girl stopped. The barrel organ met the earth with a muffled thud. This time —lid upward. The girl opened the lid, and for the first time, a musical jangle emanated from the instrument, proving that the box had some relation to the sphere of music, or the music of the spheres.

Prithrea leaned over the open barrel organ, her posture eliciting a silent moan from Aris, and suddenly drew forth a rapier. The rapier was, naturally, about twice as long as the longest side of the barrel organ, and Aris tried in vain to recall whether it had straightened out upon extraction—and whether he had even witnessed that moment. But in the preceding instants, he had been interested neither in what was below nor in what was above. The only thing that mattered was that the charron could—potentially—imagine himself taking Prithrea in.

Without warning and from a considerable distance, she suddenly tossed the rapier to Aris in such a way that all he had to do was open his right hand. The weapon was his. The hilt framed his fist as an enormous world frames a grain of sand. The hated gaze from behind his left shoulder vanished as abruptly as it had appeared back on the watershed crest. Everything returned to normal.

Everything. Returned. To normal.

"Until we meet ahead," said Prithrea without any expression, and dissolved into the alley.

Aris shrugged his shoulders, casting off the chilling freedom, turned to Optician Jinngo, walked the few paces separating them through the night mist, and passed the rapier from hand to hand:

"You can figure out something with the scabbard yourself."

⁂

Jinngo, having indifferently tracked the gradual blurring of Prithrea's watercolor silhouette into nothing, assessed the weapon's weight and noted how swiftly regret for the familiar blade lost at the accursed customs house had died. He did not, however, waste time examining his new instrument. They needed to make tracks.

A cursory glance was enough for him to study the layout and mentally chart a route. They set off down a wide street. Three-story houses of identical width stood cheek by jowl. The absence of gaps in space did not negate the enormous difference in their age and the wealth of their owners. There were new brick houses, ancient stone ones, and wooden ones of indeterminate eras.

"Every ten paces we change epochs," the charron did not fail to notice the astonishing stylistic disparity, despite the haste and overall tense situation.

The optician glanced at the charron. When would fatigue and anxiety finally knock all superfluity out of him? Yet in gratitude for the rapier, he deemed it polite to sustain the untimely conversation.

"But the law is one and immutable," Jinngo pointed with a smirk of his blade at the identical lots and uniform height of the residential stories. With a whistle of steel through air, he branded the conservatism of the Magistrate of Surveyors' foundations as a whole. "Unless a house burns down, you cannot rebuild. Only repair. And within the limits set by the burgomaster. If they suspect arson—

they'll rot you in prison. One reason why our clan holds no property in cities. So as not to be beholden to anyone..."

The optician suddenly stopped.

"Listen. Regarding debts. She did pay, after all. You should settle those clocks."

Aris shrugged. He drew Prithrea's arrow, ran two fingers along the entire shaft, and took his stance. At the signal of some inner sense, he loosed the shot. After a perceptible interval, they heard a metallic sound. The clock stopped.

They continued on their way in silence.

As they walked, the optician noted by habit which streetlamps used glass produced by his clan, and which used foreign. The lantern trade reminded him of the topical and unpleasant. Those factories were co-owned by the clan and one of the guilds close to the Magistrate. And from that quarter, a bride was being foisted upon him. Which was not at all in Optician Jinngo's plans. Distracted by secondary aspects, the optician noticed too late that it had grown overly dark.

⁂

The moon had hidden behind a cloud. There were no working streetlamps left in the vicinity. The darkness led to a breakdown in the synchronization of reality and its perception.

The optician could never have imagined that the sharply jutting keel of the charon's deformed chest would prove a formidable weapon. An unexpected opponent had not foreseen it either—the man who suddenly lunged at Aris from the darkness lay in the street dust, as if struck down by a hammer.

The enemies crashed into the two companions' reality in greater numbers, shattering the wall of normalcy. Jinngo initially experienced a shock that was not physiological, but cultural. He had never before found himself in such a situation, having spent his prosperous life in a world that was safe, predictable, polite, and even, in places, contemplative.

The attack seemed absurd. The optician perceived it as if he and Aris, being actors renowned throughout the land, were sitting in armchairs on a softly lit theater stage, performing an intelligent two-man play, reciting a memorized dialogue of ancient sages; and then suddenly, from down below, out of the darkness of the vast auditorium, enraged by some unknown cause, having taken umbrage at some uttered conclusion to the point of readiness for murder, the mob surged

forward to tear them apart. For what? For a line? But those were not their words! It was merely a quotation.

Meanwhile, the charron did not philosophize. The charron's forward-jutting Hump continued to deal substantial damage to the foe.

The optician came to his senses. Light came to him.

"What is this?"

"The Sun."

"What is this??"

"It is when the sky does not glow. It is when all light emanates from one single point for the whole of Avertigus, high in the firmament."

The optician began to thrust and strike, and the battle brought him, along with fury, enlightenment:

"The solitary source of light moved ceaselessly in an arc, vanishing for many hours at night, and could even entirely (entirely!) hide behind clouds. And then —hope rested only on the scattering in the gases of the air."

"What a dreadful fate! How nightmarish must have been that ancient world of the Forebears, where the sky does not glow."

Jinngo suddenly became the sun—a blinding point of light. Jinngo dealt blows with his new rapier. Jinngo parried sword-strokes. Who better than an optician could know the angles of reflection and incidence? No one! Nothing reflected solid matter without loss of energy to heat better than Prithrea's blade. From whence it came, thither it returned—provided the blade was met by a steady hand. Imperceptibly, five men fell beneath Optician Jinngo's blows, having, in essence, killed themselves. The blade was undeniably unique. It was not bloodthirsty; its weight did not lend itself to offensive strikes. But the solidity of its defense was absolute.

The curiosity that Jinngo had followed yesterday was rapidly gorging itself on matter, spirit, the lives of others. Curiosity—the only motive among those capable of becoming life-forming which cannot be sated. Learn one thing, and you will crave to know twice as much. Jinngo glanced around greedily, his eyes devouring his surroundings.

That face! That was the spy from the tavern, the one who had brazenly sat down beside them. Only now—he was clad in the vestments of a "brother" of the

Fatherate of the Unbelievers in the Indestructibility of the Ether. What a vile creature. How disgustingly base their black robes were, the optician thought. On the shoulders and nape of each—large red appliqués. With loathsome hypocrisy, they symbolized the places on the body touched by a water-carrier's yoke. These parasites never lift a finger in their entire lives! They pretend to be the descendants of glorious adepts of constructive labor. Freeloaders. Robes of the most expensive fabric, so long that even honorable Coriole is starting to wonder whether to twist their skirts and cause them to trip over their own feet.

The spy's vile mug kept its distance, while the opponents—his hirelings, evidently—were not fighting at full strength. "They want to catch us, seize us, take us alive," flashed through the optician's mind. Yes. That was it. Here came a great net of thick hemp, with four ball-weights at its four corners. In a moment, the optician would be beneath it. But no. The charron shot an arrow straight into one of the weights, hitting its precise center of inertia. The net soared upward, fell, and some of the attackers found themselves underneath it. They were now—excessively interdependent. They panicked, flailed their limbs. This led to their complete entanglement. In their cries—despair and bewilderment. How could everything have reversed so swiftly, unto its very opposite?!

Jinngo was seized by a powerful curiosity to see what lay inside the belly of that insolent fellow. A powerful one. But fatigue was bearing down upon the optician, and there was no easy path of retreat. Somewhere in his chest, anxiety began to stir.

A "wild kerchief" flashed by—a neckerchief, an attribute in the garb of every member of the Order of the Allotheism of Makers. This adept did not hide his name. On his chest was a patch: Haakon the Good. His curls were steel-colored. An old man, and his face was majestic in its wrath. The black sword in his hand was fearsome. With him were his spiritual oath-brothers. Not hirelings.

"Thus it was spoken over the cinders and waters of the Higher Lake," Haakon bellowed, " 'Do what you wilt. Or be thyself. But not both at once.' "

The charron suddenly found himself first beside Haakon, and then beside Optician Jinngo. What was he planning? In his hand was a stranger's quiver, full of short, wicked arrows. The skirmish was heating up. The adepts of the Order roughly matched the brothers of the Fatherate in number.

"Follow me!" Aris breathed his near-order in a hoarse near-whisper. "Why are you rushing in yourself? Gone mad?"

Jinngo shook off the spell of the moment, ducked low, and scurried between the flowing vestments of the clergy. He and the charron broke free and ran fast. Fast and twistingly. Until the first streetlamps. The charron, without thinking, shot at a lamppost from below at such an angle that its housing was wrenched from its cradle atop the post. The entire glass structure soared upward with the arrow and described a steep arc. Together, just as they were, lamp and arrow crashed down upon the second and last burning lantern at the crossroads. With a mournful clink, the surrounding space of the night city sank into darkness. At once, a couple of candle flames in windows also vanished. Residents warily observing the commotion preferred to dissolve into absence.

Having run a few more blocks under only the light of the partially hidden Moon, they stopped in exhaustion. There was a small square here. Within it—comical wooden penguins. A game for children—hide and flip over. Become a bird, even if inside a wooden box. Even if flightless. The friends, now comrades-in-arms, decided to become such birds in order to wait out a possible pursuit in a cunning and paradoxical hiding place not intended for them.

⁂

Aris and Jinngo knelt, back to back, in the cramped body of the wooden bird. They kept silent until all sounds in the distance had died away. The box smelled faintly of sweat. The blood remaining on the rapier could also be sensed.

"Are you afraid, friend?" the optician asked in a whisper. "Did you see how many I killed? I have never killed before. The light burns from within."

"I am afraid," the charron rasped, trying not to press his spine too hard against his partner due to his jutting bone. "I can barely breathe. What was that, in a manner of speaking?"

"Strange, but I don't feel guilty," Jinngo's composure was swiftly returning. "That spy from the tavern tailed us and set them on us, cinder in his eye. That much is clear. But why? What for?"

"We'll have to find out," Aris agreed, mournfully and even somewhat lazily.

"I see two possible answers. Either the mere fact of associating with Prithrea, forgive me… or because of what I managed to blurt out and wicked ears overheard. There, by the cauldron. The trouble is, brother, I no longer properly recall what I said."

"Still less do I," the charron agreed. "We have nothing to analyze. Perhaps the majordomo informed on us?"

"Na-ah," the optician rejected that version with an indeterminate interjection. "We pull such tricks with dispatches every year. My old man uses them somehow in official accounting. Nothing bloody was ever noted in such matters."

The optician, despite the cramped circumstances and the danger of cutting himself on the rapier standing in the very corner, managed to free a trapped hand and scratch his head.

"Here's what I think," he said, almost returning to his normal optimistic tone: "A fitting thought has visited me. We need to pull off one little thing before we lie low at Virgilia's."

"Virgilia—is she the one we were riding to?" Aris asked.

"Yes. She's a querist… no, now a questant. Practically an official person. You need to shoot out the remaining four clock faces on the town hall tower. Understand?"

"A spontaneous absurdity for misdirection?" the charron clarified.

"Something like that… I can't explain it myself, but I somehow feel Virgilia will praise us for such a move under the circumstances. Can you do it?"

Aris felt and shifted the trophy quiver at the bottom of the penguin.

"There are the strange arrows—you can probably feel them with your foot. I can. They're not much good, though. I'll have to shoot from the rooftops. And get closer. But won't they chase us? It'll be noisy."

"Excellent. I'll lead us over the rooftops," the optician made to flick back his forelock in a habitual gesture underscoring readiness for action, but only bumped the back of his head against the charron's nape. "I used to run around here as a child with my pals. Even if someone follows the noise… I'm sure—they won't catch us."

⁂

Getting out of the penguin proved harder than getting in. Jinngo twisted around and pressed his face to the two eye-holes. After a while, he pulled back and whispered:

"I can't see a thing, but I'm afraid to climb out. There doesn't seem to be anyone, but I can't shake the feeling that I'm watching someone."

"Those two holes are precisely for observation," the charron observed. "On the other side, there are eyes painted around them."

"That much I understand. Penguin eyes. Damn it, Aris, they're dehumanizing me," Jinngo was nervous in earnest.

"I'd be happy to tell you, friend Jinngo, that it's just the physiology of the jitters, but I feel as if in a delirium myself. Trapped, yet seeing all. When there seems to be no one to see. All is quiet. And yet I am simultaneously both overseer and prisoner."

"Once, there was a guest in my old man's study. I overheard their conversation. Long ago. He said that when something is difficult—achieved through effort—that, supposedly, is hypocrisy and spiritual pride."

"I don't understand," the charron admitted.

"As I understood it, weakness should be used as a weapon."

"Against what?" Aris still did not understand.

"Against the limitations of human nature and reality, of course."

"And how?"

"One must give a sincere oath," the optician announced in a considerably more optimistic tone.

"To whom?" the charron continued to wonder. "Do you think the bird won't let us go without it?"

"There's no one here but us," the optician reasonably noted. "To each other, I suppose."

He refrained from mentioning the bird again unnecessarily, to ward off trouble.

"If we can do without blood, then I'm for it. I swear, dear friend!"

"And I swear!" Jinngo said cheerfully, sprang out of the wooden bird, and pulled his friend after him.

The remaining penguins turned reluctantly in the wind, and the creak of their pivots clearly approved the abstractness of the oath.

⁂

The full Moon proved to be in solidarity with the friends' plans. When they climbed onto the ridgepole of the nearest roof, it tolerably illuminated the rooftops. Aris saw the city from above for the first time in his life. It turned out that a faint spiral could be discerned in the layout of the streets. Maps did not show this fact. The roofs, for the most part, stood flush against one another.

Here and there were gaps above ancient narrow alleys that could not even accommodate carts. Such crevices could be leaped across with a running start. The problem was the steep pitches. Jinngo set about preparing his partner:

"Let me explain. I caroused up here many a Selen, maybe years. So I know the ropes. In short—run after me. Walking won't work; you'll start slipping. The whole trick is in picking the right lateral angle for each slope. They're all different, the blasted things. But my eye and my stride are trained. First firing position—that yellow chimney over there. There's a ledge. Ready? Let's go!"

The optician moved from rooftop to rooftop, artfully shifting the angles of ascent, just as a beam of light does when crossing a stack of thick glass of varying densities. He unerringly determined the optimal trajectory in advance. The town hall tower was entirely visible from everywhere—the only other tall building was the water tower, but it stood on the outskirts, right by the fortress wall.

On the town hall tower were five enormous clock faces, one for each of the great rivers. The faces were, naturally, oriented in different directions. The friends had to run about the rooftops. The wretched foreign shafts broke, stumbling upon wretched arrowheads. Yet, even if messily, they stopped all the clocks.

⁂

"But does anyone know about your connection to her?" the charron doubted, when they found themselves on the roof of the house adjacent to Virgilia's. "Maybe we should wait out till morning on some rooftop?"

"Firstly, the roofs will be searched. Out of the hundreds of people who heard our footsteps overhead, a couple are bound to report to the guard. Secondly, nighttime Virgilia and morning Virgilia are different people. Right now, she'll just send us to sleep on the floor, offering a couple of straw pallets. She'll think we were out carousing somewhere. But in the morning, she might be in too clever and abstract a mood to want to take us seriously. She won't let us in, and that'll be that. Understand? Enough, don't argue. We need Alkinoys Street, Number 7. That's it."

And so it turned out. A comely young woman, wrapped head to toe in a blanket, having first verified by voice that it was Jinngo, let the comrades in, though they held their weapons behind their backs. Barely conscious, she pointed them to the floor on the first story of the narrow three-story house, and then silently went back upstairs to sleep. They had to search the dressers for the pallets themselves. No one offered them tea, either.

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Fragment 22. At Virgilia's

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"Hey, you down there, hungover wretches!" Virgilia's voice came from above. "Come up. I'm not coming down to fetch you drunkards."

Jinngo, who was already awake by then, nudged the charron gently in the side: "Wake up, brother. The privy's in the inner courtyard, then come up to the second floor." He himself straightened his rumpled clothes as best he could, stepped to the mirror, grunted in vexation, adjusted them again, then smoothed them once more.

Voices already sounded from the street; a cart rumbled over the cobblestones. Jinngo crept cautiously to the window, peering out from behind the curtain for a while. Then he simply stood before the mirror, apparently hoping for some spontaneous, miraculous improvement, then waved a hand at his reflection and went to surrender himself to the mercy of their hostess.

"Greetings, dear Virgilia," Jinngo smiled, having climbed to the upper floor where the kitchen and dining room were situated.

The pleasant scent of coffee and griddle cakes filled the air. Jinngo seated himself at the table, away from the window—the light stung his eyes.

"Aha," said the young lady. "You haven't been drinking! Diligent Forebears, you reek of sour sweat. Hunting, I presume? Unsuccessfully, by the looks of it? Who's your friend?"

"More than a friend," said the optician, putting on an apologetic face for the odor. "A comrade-in-arms. You can use informal address with him right away. His name is Aris."

"Comrade-in-arms, you say? Aris? Unfamiliar name. There's no such Line. Were you ever attached to an army? I'm unaware of that period in your brief biography," she smiled warmly from behind her palisade of questions and tossed an orange across the room at the optician: "Freshen up."

Jinngo grinned mysteriously, caught the fruit easily, and just then the charron came up the stairs from below. He gave Virgilia a formal bow. His hair, mean-

while, seemed to billow slightly, as if clean, which greatly surprised Optician Jinngo.

"Bah! Could it be, Jinngo, that for once, contrary to your custom, you haven't tried to mislead me?" Virgilia blossomed. "Your friend is a charron! I, a questant of the first class, do not personally know a single charron. I'm now prepared to believe in your martial past."

She approached the charron and shook his hand.

"Greetings, esteemed Aris. Welcome. Do sit down as well, beside Optician Jinngo. I shall feed you, so be it. Now tell the tale, Jinngo. Don't waste time; I'm due at work soon."

Jinngo clearly and coherently laid out for her the recent chronicle.

All the while Jinngo spoke, she walked very slowly about the elongated room. Now, however, she sat down at the table with everyone else. Her place was right by the window. Jinngo admired how the light cleaved through her mane.

"Thus: a formal preamble, despite the familiarity of the conversation," Virgilia's speech flowed carefully. "Before I begin to state or ask anything. Addressed more to you, esteemed Aris. Jinngo already knows. I am not religious. When I say 'The Makers' or something in that vein, I mean natural forces, nothing more. Furthermore, for now I am operating under the assumption that neither of you has lost his mind. Which is by no means a given..."

"Good morning, neighbor," came a voice from below, from the street. It was addressed to Virgilia. "Did you hear? Someone was stomping over the rooftops last night. They knocked down the hanger for my water pipe, the brutes."

"No one stomped on my roof, as you were pleased to phrase it," the young lady replied sternly. "Good morning. And your pipe was hanging any which way the day before yesterday—don't exaggerate to me, good neighbor."

"Did you hear," the voice from the street continued, utterly unembarrassed at being caught in a lie, "that the churchmen staged an internecine slaughter last night?"

"My thesis regarding your possible insanity is withdrawn," Virgilia said into the room. And then she answered out the window, using a colloquial word for the World for greater emphasis: "No, I hadn't heard yet. What's happening under Avertigo's vaults, just think! If I learn anything at work without a 'classified' stamp, I'll tell you this evening. Farewell, neighbor."

She rose from her chair, paced the room once more, took two oranges, and practically thrust them into the guests' hands. Then she addressed the optician:

"For how long did you personally witness the absence of Coriole?"

"No more than a minute."

"Did you experience dizziness?"

"No. But there were some changes in my perception of the world, I recall that now."

"And neither of you remembers what you told this Prithrea?"

"She was the one telling us something, rather. Something about a caterpillar, but it's flown out of my head," said the charron.

"Likewise," the optician nodded in response to that remark.

"Where's the rapier?"

The optician fetched the weapon and passed it from hand to hand to Virgilia.

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"Illegal, I presume?" Virgilia said affirmatively, inspecting the rapier.

The optician shrugged. It seemed to Virgilia that there was more in this gesture than Optician Jinngo's usual disregard for elementary rules.

"How heavy it is," Virgilia marveled. She tried to bend the blade with both hands. It wouldn't budge. She had to exert far greater effort, and over her knee at that, before a curve became apparent. An arc of tension arose throughout the room. Yielding not only to common sense and protocol for such a situation, but also to an inner caution that had unexpectedly awoken, Virgilia asked Optician Jinngo in a tone that brooked no objection: "Very well. I shall take this thing with me to the precinct until evening, agreed?"

Virgilia then turned to Aris:

"For how long did you personally witness the absence of Coriole?" she repeated her question to Optician Jinngo word for word, evidently following some habit or instruction.

"It is unknown to me precisely how long Coriole had been inactive at the moment I noticed it. But no more than an hour, while I was waiting out the rain. Before the rain, the watershed was certainly where it ought to have been. And I noticed it three quarters of an hour before I rang the bell at the homestead gate.

It seems to me that the cessation occurred almost simultaneously with my shot, but I allow that this may be a subjective sensation."

Virgilia noted that the charron's verbosity stemmed solely from carefulness. The resulting reply from Aris was vague, but she discerned in it a sincere attempt to reconstruct the situation.

"You believe you missed because the arrow ceased to be deflected sideways as it should have been?"

"Yes."

"What a comfortable 'yes'," Virgilia thought.

"Could this have happened due to a change in your internal state, caused by the departure of Coriole?"

"That cannot be denied. However, I subsequently estimated the magnitude of the deviation—it corresponds to the normal effect of Coriole."

"Why, in your opinion, do you not remember the substance of the conversation with Prithrea?"

"I am not indifferent to her. For a long time now."

Virgilia looked at Optician Jinngo.

"Why did Optician Jinngo's behavior during the skirmish seem inadequate to you?"

"It seemed to me he was striving to kill that spy, even though there was no rational reason for it. It would have been more reasonable to work exclusively toward retreat from the outset."

"Why did you take the risk and linger near Haakon the Good?" Virgilia asked, stressing the word "risk."

"I copied the text from his barter-device."

"Show me."

The charron showed her his pendant barter-device.

Virgilia rose and gathered the used dishes from the table.

Then, with a practiced motion, she copied the contents of the charron's barter-device into her own personal instrument. Aris gave the rotors of his device a relieved spin. Relieved—or so it seemed to Virgilia.

Having cleared the table's surface, she spread a clean cloth. Laying the rapier diagonally across the table, she carefully wrapped the object, then took a spool of formal red firmabider's tether from a sideboard. With the skill of a seasoned notary-clerk, she sealed the parcel and stood it upright beside the staircase. Then she announced:

"Rest. Do not show your noses outside! No noise. Do not open the door for anyone."

Virgilia fell to thinking for a few moments and then declared in a tone that left no room for objection:

"Aris, be so kind as to surrender your documents and all your money to me for safekeeping. It will be safer that way. You, Jinngo, I won't ask—you have nothing anyway."

The charron obediently handed her his purse, nodding at his bow to indicate that it served as his document.

Virgilia went up to her bedroom on the third floor to change. A very short while later, she descended, dressed like a true city fashionista. Perhaps she conducted interrogations in one body and went out into the city in another.

She noticed Jinngo admiring her. Virgilia was twenty-eight, noticeably older than he, but his eyes read: "How infinitely lovely she is at twenty-eight. How delightfully contradictory her appearance." City fashion was dictated by actors and courtesans. The authorities, of course, tried to control it. But the results of these efforts were mediocre. Virgilia was now dressed in a magnificent haori of dense silk the color of a young kite. Her barter-device hung on a fine chain—like a pendant. It was perfectly obvious that her status did not permit her to wear such a thing, especially to work. Yet to imagine that she would be denied entry to the Chancellery building, let alone the precinct, on that account… was impossible. And should it happen, within a sennight half the city of both sexes would be wearing that color and cut.

When she was almost at the door, Jinngo asked:

"What do you make of the clocks on the town hall? Did we do the right thing?"

"You came up with some sort of foolishness, that's what I make of it. The clocks cannot be damaged by a light arrow or by holding the minute hand on the face—the mechanism simply halts to prevent damage from any obstruction. A mechanic comes and restarts it. A matter of minutes. They're already showing the correct time—look out the window."

At that, Virgilia suddenly returned and placed the mournful parcel with the rapier into a wide chest of drawers: "Better I come for it when it's needed." She left, and Aris and Jinngo remained locked in the questant's house.

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Fragment 23. Cost and Cooperation

¶

Disappointment, it turns out, can be colored in various hues. Jinngo shuffled from corner to corner for a while, grumbling about the "foolishness with the clocks."

"Ah, to quaff a pint or two of ale," he said at last. "Why did you give her all the money?"

"To begin with, you're the one who brought me here," Aris replied. "But to be precise—not all. Look, one teller left behind my hatband. Sometimes I stroll out light."

"What a magnificent habit," Jinngo praised. "As it happens: in Tavern Number Three, for fifty groats they serve a full meal with an enormous mug of ale."

"I know, there's one just like it in Volmelftstein."

"Well, let's go!" He rubbed his fists in impatience.

"Are we not safeguarding our lives here?" Aris inquired cautiously.

"Drop it. It's literally around the corner. I'll lend you my cloak; drape it like a 'tent.' I'll go in just my frock coat."

"But how will we lock the door from outside?" the charron continued to resist.

"The window, brother. The window onto the back courtyard," the optician left his new friend no chance.

The optician had somewhat strayed from the truth regarding the distance to the establishment, but they arrived swiftly and without incident. Tavern Number Three—a name both artless and precise—stood in the middle of an oval square. A newer building, not gloomy. Beneath the windows hung flower boxes of forget-me-nots wrapped in clean sackcloth. Quite festive.

"Could you change a small coin, Master Optician?" A lad darted up to them, holding out a coin worth a tenth of a teller. His other palm, cupped upward, begged. "I ask for the sake of helping others. I believe I am doing a good deed."

They were already standing on the broad porch-terrace. Viewed from above, it was a trapezoid. The facade wall, owing to the oversight of a new generation of architects, faced the summit of the Great Mountain. Therefore, the orientation of the exit, in order to conform to old superstitions, had been altered by means of a typical "crutch" in such cases—a skewed porch.

"No," the charron refused the boy with a gesture, feeling for the single coin behind his hatband. He smiled, avoiding eye contact.

"Go to the church for alms," Jinngo did not mince words. "There they'll help you set your heart aright, and something else besides."

They entered. Inside was a muffled din, grumbling, bickering. A surprise awaited them.

"One teller and four groats, good sirs," the cashier said dully, formally indicating an old banner behind his back upon which all the words missing from his rejoinder were inscribed.

"Four what?" the lads chorused in incomprehension, disregarding all formalities. The price of a standard meal in Tavern Number Three had been a constant for at least the entirety of the current century and a tail-end of the last.

The cashier sighed insincerely, extending his palm.

"Well… we don't have it," was all the charron could say in his surprise.

"No change needed," Jinngo promptly added, not allowing the unpleasant situation to take root. "One meal for the two of us, in that case. What can we do, we're hungry. And we consider this extremely important."

The cashier took the money, gave back forty-eight groats in change, generated a receipt, and made a dismissive "dimitto"—a light push of air with a calm palm from the chest, fingers up.

At the serving counter, they handed the receipt to the worker and took the tray of food. They were serving perch chowder and blood sausage with stewed cabbage. A poor pairing. Also a fresh salad, likewise of cabbage, with flecks of apple. In addition—a whole apple each. But most importantly—an enormous two-pint mug of ale each.

When they had settled by the window on the second floor, Jinngo twirled that same receipt in front of his companion:

"I'll go take a second helping," he said and vanished. A short while later, the optician returned with an identical set of victuals.

"Their own fault," the optician muttered. "They disregard the firmness of morals. Paid receipts are supposed to be stuck on a spike. To void them and keep them from scattering like litter."

"And here, what?"

"Did you not notice?" Jinngo marveled. "How inattentive you are, brother. Trouble never comes alone. First Coriole broke, then—centuries-old price stability. Now they've lost their mandated spike. Or someone stole it. They're tossing receipts into a bowl of water so they don't rustle pointlessly. So I swiped one. One shouldn't trust liquids in important matters, right?"

Without waiting for a reply, general praise, or still less censure for theft, he instantly demolished his—or rather, not his—food. The charron, consuming what in his case was now quite honest fare, was not far behind.

"Why are you so hard up, Jinngo? You're rich, after all."

"Bah… my father considers me a thing. Started me too early, I think. He hasn't lived to wisdom himself, yet he crushes me. And by the time he understands, it'll be too late."

"So what's to be done?" the charron wondered sincerely, mentally imagining himself in such a humiliating situation.

"Not long to wait now. Soon, very soon, I'll come into my own rights."

"What, you'll claim a share of the clan's wealth?" Aris asked guilelessly.

"No. That's messy, base. And I don't need it. I have a license. It's personal, not clan property. My knowledge as an optician is certified by the Academy. I shall be an optician myself. Sole proprietor."

The optician rattled off this rejoinder with his mug already in hand. They clinked.

"And do you truly know the science?" Aris permitted himself to doubt, by right of friendship.

"Oh, brother. Of light, I know everything! And how to grind glass, and how to melt it, how to rid it of inclusions," Jinngo declared. The charron judged that the ale had not yet taken effect, so he could be believed. The optician, however, launched into earnest: "Including the knowledge of the Forebears—I know it.

Although in their books, there's so much that is... somehow off-topic. Hard to understand what they're even talking about."

"For instance?"

"Well, for instance, we believe that the angle of incidence of a ray equals the angle of reflection. In lenses, I mean."

"Yes. Everyone knows that. So what?" said Aris. "With some losses, of course. Not entirely equal—that's what we were taught."

"True," the optician nodded. "But how does the light 'know' what angle is where?"

"I don't even understand the question, let alone how to answer it."

"You and I ran across the rooftops. I changed the angles of ascent. Light does the same when it passes obliquely through different panes of glass. But I know how to conserve energy because I've traversed that path not once, not ten times before. How does it know where it's fastest? Yet it flies so as to scatter the least. It chooses that path. The one and only best, understand? How does it know?"

"Are you saying that light communicates with itself?" the charron asked.

"Or it can peer into the future. One or the other. There's no other way..."

Jinngo suddenly rose from the table.

"No, wait, brother, let me interrogate him," Jinngo raised a commanding hand.

In a corner of the hall, with his own tray, sat none other than Haakon the Good. The optician moved toward him without a second thought. Aris sighed and trudged after him.

Jinngo addressed Haakon the Good with utmost directness:

"Why did you attack us?"

Haakon was a very sturdy old man, wrinkled, but with remarkable steel-blue curls and a deeply tanned face, which spoke of journeys up the mountain. Without his black sword, he looked far less terrible, yet even unarmed, he was an extremely imposing individual. It was clear that the problem of choosing between conformism and authenticity had never stood before him. In response to Optician Jinngo's remark, Haakon was genuinely taken aback:

"It was the Fatherate who attacked, young master optician. Not us! We, on the contrary, were coming to beat them off."

"Why would they do that?" Jinngo cooled at once.

"Why, young master? Your majordomo informed on you. About Coriole, and about the forged dispatch."

"Where did the wretch find a pigeoneer out there?"

"You're young and naive, young master. All spies at the houses of clans have a special little bird for just such an occasion. A small one. Did he have a bird in his quarters?"

"There was a cage, I think."

"Well, there you have it. Go on, young master, finish your drink. We'll likely meet again. If I were you, I'd keep my head down somewhere. For a time."

The optician deemed it most profitable to follow the old man's advice. He grunted a "Farewell" to him and returned to his seat.

"I'm for the second option—light's foresight of the future," Jinngo demonstrated his sobriety by recalling where the conversation had broken off. "Because no one has ever observed 'inexperienced' rays. On the other hand, perhaps they are all eternal and have been living for an eternity. That's why they all learned to fly long ago. Everywhere."

Aris, to digest the information received, had to finish his entire mug. He reflected that circumstances had twisted so remarkably that yesterday's miss, essentially a professional catastrophe, had become an insignificant backdrop to events. The optician, it seemed to Aris, also had no desire to discuss the majordomo. So he decided to learn more about the nature of light, since the opportunity had presented itself.

"Well, and the Forebears?" the charron asked. "How did they regard this problem?"

"They refused to believe blindly that light looked from the future into the past. They devised another explanation, wherein light was broken down into an immense number of sparklette elementals. Supposedly, these collided with one another and with matter. And indeed, if one imagined such an immense flock of sparklette-sheep, how they rushed about from fence to fence, how they jostled, one could arrive at the result. But the Forebears had performed their calculations the same as we do."

"Why? If they grasped the true essence of things," the charron did not understand.

"According to their way, it turned out complicated. So complicated that it's utterly impossible to estimate the angles."

"They were deceiving themselves, then?"

"So it seems."

As they approached the house, the charron noticed from afar Virgilia descending from the porch with a parcel in her hands. She must have gone to her precinct on official business and returned for the rapier. They ducked into an alley and waited there until she disappeared. Then they slipped into the house by the same route they had fled. Judging by the questant's unhurried pace, she had not noticed her friends' absence.

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This time, Virgilia did not go to her district precinct. She made her way to the central Chancellery of Inquisition. There she filed a formal request through the duty officer:

"Let them find a comely barrel-organ girl in the city or at the fairs beyond the gates and bring her to me. If she balks, tell her it's concerning the freak. Use no force. If she refuses, let them drop it and merely report that I await her at my precinct. And now, summon the coordinator of informants among the pickpockets. When the barrel-organ girl is here, inform me. I shall be in the archive."

The duty officer was already departing to process Virgilia's requests when she called him back:

"And while you're at it, gather all materials on Haakon the Good for me."

When the coordinator of street informants appeared, Virgilia entered the text given to her by the charron into a nameless utilitarian barter-device and handed him the little mechanical instrument with the words:

"Have the urchins, pickpockets, and other rabble disseminate this. Act quickly—by direct unsanctioned stamping of all barter-devices they can reach unnoticed."

Then Virgilia descended to the basement archive and asked the archivist to gather for her everything pertaining to the clocks on the town hall, starting with the most ancient documents and incunabula. She spent some time there until she was summoned upstairs.

Prithrea smiled affably and nodded in greeting when Virgilia entered the office. The questant nodded back and silently placed the sealed parcel with the rapier

on the desk. The desk creaked. The barrel-organ girl sat on her barrel organ, having pushed the chair aside. Virgilia wondered how she had been admitted into the building with such a large object, but Prithrea began the conversation first:

"Return the rapier to Aris, please. From hand to hand. It is my sincere gift to him," she said simply.

Virgilia removed the parcel from the desk and set it in the far corner of the room.

"So then," Virgilia began her inquiry on the path to restoring disrupted harmony, "The Makers committed an oversight. Deliberate, accidental, natural—for now it matters not."

She paused in anticipation of a reaction. None came.

"In my memory, this is the first time. The archives hold nothing of the sort, either. I would know. Many, of course, have noticed."

At this, Prithrea nodded. Virgilia definitively resolved to regard the person before her not as a criminal, but as someone with a different coordinate system.

"Including, I presume, trusted agents of the Privy Council of our marvelous state of Illumiros, aides to foreign monarchs, someone from the leadership of both churches, as well as the Ears of the Throne of Maristea and other secret chancelleries of the world..."

"All the mentioned forces are, naturally, interested in preserving the status quo," Prithrea interjected. "Is that what you wish to say? You wish to, but cannot?"

"I wish to and I can," Virgilia confirmed. "They all think rigidly, therefore their immediate interest is directed not at the causes of the phenomenon, but at curtailing the surge of dissent. That is why they are trying to arrest... no, that is the wrong word... to seize without trial or investigation all who... And this is what I do not know. Whom are they hunting, good Prithrea?" Virgilia honestly admitted her lack of evidence.

"For now, only the churches are acting," Prithrea assessed the gesture and delivered a first portion of valuable information. At least, that was the impression Virgilia formed.

"Why?"

"In the doctrinal documents of both Churches, it is written: in the event of the inexplicable, find sun-worshippers, seize them, torture them, identify all remaining sectarians, and then eliminate them."

"It is written just so?"

"If one reads not only between the lines and between the words, but between the letters—then it is written just so."

"You can read between the letters?"

"When the mood strikes."

Virgilia felt an existential nakedness in the face of absurdity. By design, this role had been intended for Prithrea.

"But there are no sun-worshippers in the world," Virgilia stated firmly.

"There are devotees of sparklettes. That is the closest analogue available," Prithrea shrugged.

"And you know them?"

"I have visited them. But that is not your jurisdiction. There are no havens of theirs in Illumiros."

"But what are they to you?" Virgilia intensified the question.

"Our interests intersect in metals and optics."

"You take an interest in optics?"

"To the measure of my strength."

"Then why have our churchmen not seized you?"

"I cannot be seized," evidently implying that truth cannot be extracted by force. Virgilia chose not to pursue that aspect.

"Very well. What, then, is the worldview of the sparklette devotees?"

"It is a worldview merely aspiring," Prithrea emphasized that word, "to the world-perception of sparklettes."

"What on earth is that?"

"Elementals of light. All other elementals merely aspire to travel at the speed of light and thereby exit time," said Prithrea.

"Jinngo, the optician—he is a friend of mine," the questant observed. "He is no stranger to the problems of light and has brought translations from the books of the ancient Forebears. There was something similar in them. I do not think we can understand it."

"Observation alters reality," said Prithrea.

Virgilia remained silent, awaiting continuation.

"Even things have an inner life. We are simply inattentive."

"To what?"

"To the fact that the world has already gone mad. We live in an age of consequences."

"Of what consequences?" Virgilia asked. "I am lost now."

Prithrea placed both hands on the desk.

"I am trying as best I can, Madam Virgilia. I have not spoken this much in nigh on a century. Take the trouble and listen. Are you interested in sectarians? Well then, the task of every sectarian is not to think about the darkness, but to learn to act within it. The attempt to shield oneself from uncertainty through taboo or isolation leads to the opposite. Knowledge does not always grant control. The more we try to understand a complex system and predict its behavior, the more chaotic it can become."

"So they believe?" Virgilia presented her "mirror" hypostasis in part to stow away the "hammer" hypostasis and not lapse into a habitual interrogation. Which, as she already understood, could end far from favorably for her.

"Precisely. The means of survival is spontaneous, illogical action that does not obey the rules of the situation but reinvents the space around itself."

"How so?"

"It is possible, they believe, because time is not a line, but a layered pie. What was in the past and what will be in the future influence the present with the same force as the current moment."

"A presumptuous conviction, don't you think?" Virgilia was no longer certain which of the two was leading this maieutic.

"Yes, if one does not account for their certainty that reality is fragile. Our picture of the world, for them, is not a foundation, but merely a temporary 'ar-

rangement.' Power, violence, language, and other habits create a set of filter-rules that brazenly postulate what is real and what is not."

"Power is a habit?"

"Of course," Prithrea replied, sniffing the air like a beast. "The struggle is for control over zones where the filters hold sway. Established orders, institutions, and habits survive not so much by force as by rendering alternatives invisible."

The door to the office opened without warning, and an insolent orderly rapped his knuckles on the already open doorframe. He brought a folder. Evidently, the dossier on Haakon. His oily little eyes were clearly preparing the ground for a remark. What he intended to say was also easy to guess. Two such beautiful young women… Interrogating one another for some reason… Prithrea suddenly let out a deafening fart. The orderly vanished. The door slammed shut. Virgilia was not even certain it had been closed by the young lout.

"And how, then, to perceive the new?" Virgilia continued the interrogation as if nothing had happened. Experience.

"Cease to be an observer. Not to capture, reflecting and absorbing, but to let pass through oneself."

"Like an ideal lens?"

"A lens? No, no. They need not the épatage of focus, but a contagion capable of rotting the roots of 'reality.'"

"But that is dangerous!" Virgilia manifested the highest form of respect for fact—a warning.

"To carry it—is not so dangerous. And to carry this contagion is more important to them than to transmit it."

"Carrying it is frightening too."

"Not frightening, for personality, in their view, is not a monolith, but a process in layered time."

"I understand: one must not fear glitches or seek stability where there is none, is that it?" said the questant.

"Something of the sort. Will you search for sectarians?"

"You know what, good Prithrea. I propose we act more pragmatically. And I think I shall leave the florid philosophies to the churchmen."

"Entirely reasonable."

"The anomaly began at the watershed. Who knows better than smugglers where borders flow amiss? We shall go and pay an uninvited visit to the smuggler clan," Virgilia rose from her chair, poured herself a glass of water, set one before Prithrea, and drank hers. "They alone are linked—even if only by rumor—to the anomalies of watersheds."

"The Unrecognized State of the Sixth River, you mean to say. Why 'we'? Who is 'we'?" asked Prithrea, sipping from her glass.

"You, I, Aris, and Jinngo. I shall take temporary leave."

"Why would you do this if you'll be outside your status?"

"Curiosity," Virgilia replied, took the heavy parcel with the rapier in hand, and made to leave.

"And why would I? You have a headache," Prithrea said calmly.

"Curiosity as well. And you have lied for the first time this whole conversation, and even then only by omission. It remains a question whose head aches more."

"Curiosity it is, then, good Virgilia," Prithrea granted her consent, lifting the barrel organ. "Let us not foul the air further. Money and giraffes—on you."

The women exited the room. Both with burdens, but both—satisfied.

¶

Fragment 24. The Inversion of Religious Sense

Prithrea and Virgilia were approaching the house. The questant was leading Prithrea to her dwelling.

Here was the pavement, boasting neither smoothness nor cleanliness. Cobblestones the color of ash from burnt letters lay beside one another with gaps—like turtles basking in the sun. Here the walls of houses, sloppily spackled, reflected the light of Avertigo's sky in shades of spicy ground ginger. Virgilia's gaze darted along the street like a bumblebee over a shopkeeper's cracked crate—hovered and hovered, then settled into a sweet puddle. Something had allowed Virgilia, jolted awake from automatism, to see her familiar street as it might have been. Or perhaps as it always had been. There stood her house. Likely the oldest on the entire street. The only one with a strange three-pitched roof, out of fashion for a couple of centuries. In its masonry, no two stones were alike. Yet they fitted one another more snugly than anywhere, bound by centuries. The house stood on high piles made from the petrified trunks of prototaxites. Though perhaps the forest of them had grown here when the building was raised. Because of this, the porch was excessively high. Excessively?

Neither to grasp what possible advantage lay in it, nor to analyze the causes of the entire epiphany, proved possible—for on her porch sat a lad of twelve or thirteen. A ragamuffin. Beside him stood a bulky canvas sack. "Madam Virgi..." Virgilia did not let him finish, glanced about warily, opened the door, and with an undulant flick of her wrist shoved the boy inside. Only then did she politely invite Prithrea, who had ignored the urchin, to enter.

"Well? Who are you? What do you want?" Virgilia did not trouble herself with full sentences.

"Here," said the boy, handing over the sack. "I heard, Madam Virgilia, you've been asking after some churchly barter-devices since early morning. I filched a few for you in the rich trading rows. Right on the Square of the Two Churches."

The scrawny creature breathed seldom and smelled distinctly of street filth.

"A few? There's nigh on a hundred here," she opened the sack slightly and clutched her head. "I don't need a single one! Who put you up to this, you stray wretch. Fine. Sit here for now."

Virgilia went upstairs and exchanged a few words there with Jinngo and the charron. She returned with three bright orange oranges and two black-black cakes. Each the size of a large fist. Prithrea looked upon this assortment with marked approval. Then Virgilia handed over the treats, locked the front door with a padlock, and ordered the scamp to wait as long as necessary. He did not demur, but merely hid the black-and-orange within his gray rags.

Having gone upstairs together with Prithrea, Virgilia first of all slit the red firm-abider's tethers on the parcel with the rapier and tucked the cuttings into a special box.

"We'll have to digress for an urgent matter, I beg everyone's pardon," said Virgilia, striving not to notice Optician Jinngo's sour expression. "It's good that everyone is already acquainted."

She handed the parcel to Aris.

"From hand to hand," Prithrea stopped her. Virgilia unfolded the cloth and passed the rapier bared, from hand to hand.

⁂

The charron sat at the table with everyone else and managed to devour Prithrea with his eyes in such a way that no one saw him gazing at her. Besides, people always—out of politeness—tried to look at him less often. The rapier lay across his thighs like a cozy plank of calm. Prithrea sat like the others—on a chair. The barrel organ stood in the corner.

Virgilia set a large fruit tray on the table and emptied the sack of all the barter-devices onto it. In a heap. The little mechanical instruments, by the charron's estimation, numbered about fifty. Maybe more. Many of them were inlaid with glittering little stones. Some had unconventional shapes.

The charron listened with half an ear as Virgilia explained to everyone the essence of her scheme with the barter-devices, as she lamented that the boy waiting downstairs had misunderstood the coordinator. Though perhaps he was not one of those who cooperated with the authorities at all... "Perhaps this, perhaps that," Aris thought.

The room, illuminated by Prithrea's presence, seemed more hospitable to Aris. He had always lived on the ground floor, where the floor was usually earthen (as in his case) or checkered stone. Here it was wooden. Cozier that way, though impractical. The inner casement part of the window extended across the whole transom, not just the small pane. A tall, narrow hearth with five large vases on the mantelpiece. A window with tiny square panes, palm-sized, with slightly differing tints of glass. A pair of paintings. One of them was not quite ordinary. It depicted a girl attending to her morning toilette, hence a curtain on the painting, which was, however, half drawn aside…

"So, not out of antipayour toward the churchmen of the Fatherate, but simply as an experiment, I've been carrying the word of Haakon the Good throughout the city and environs all day," Virgilia concluded her account of how she had voluntarily-compulsorily enlisted the city urchins to copy Haakon's text unnoticed onto every barter-device within reach. "Someone during the day already rendered it into plain language: 'From the Lord and Fashioner | of the Universe and all souls | the zest for life was sudden stole—though He be omnipresent whole.'"

"And what's the original?" Jinngo grumbled.

Virgilia suddenly grew flustered:

"Imagine," she said, "I've seen so many distorted versions all day that I no longer recall how it went at first… Ah! The original remains on my personal barter-device."

And here she not only grew flustered, but blushed. Nevertheless, she took her instrument from her purse. It became obvious to Aris and Prithrea that this was a gift from Jinngo—the little machine bore an inlay of rays and lenses. An unmistakably optical theme.

"Oho," said Jinngo, studying the thirteen pictograms of a standard barter-device text-stamp. "He's got 'God-the-creator' entered via blending."

The optician ran his index fingernail with light clicks over the squares of pictograms. The charron took the instrument from him:

"You can't get around 'can/ability' and 'extreme-much' in the predicate of 'subject.' That's a fact," he said. "But 'parent/reproduce' plus 'all'—that's already a religious conviction. Meaning, not a fact."

"That's why the averaging predicate is there. Since among all one hundred eight existing pictograms there was no room for 'god,' whereas 'gravitation' — there

you go, though nobody really knows what that is," said Jinngo, observing how the charron was tempted to twiddle the symbol-selection rotors—they were made of such wondrous metal. But the charron refrained.

"Meaning cultural tradition is older than the World, but younger than the force of gravity, that's all," said Prithrea. "Virgilia, do I understand correctly that your goal is to loose heresy through the city in general, not this picto-motto in particular?"

Virgilia took her instrument in hand, twirled it without touching the pictogram-changing wheels, and then with a slight effort stamped it against the first one that came to hand from the heap on the table. The inscription from her barter-device migrated, naturally, onto the stranger's instrument.

"Both. The customary hypocrisy," Virgilia showed her barter-device, which now bore the text that had migrated from the stamped little instrument, "church propaganda..."

"What else can you expect," Jinngo shook his head, "the foundations have tottered, the rats are scurrying in the corners. And you're only too glad to poke at them with scorched rags."

The charron, a bumpkin at heart, felt his head swell from all these city affairs. Who was chasing whom—unclear. He himself did not support the custom of exchanging meanings, though he had an instrument, of course. His mother had given it to him when she was alive. Only with her had he ever played at pictogram-games.

Virgilia looked at Optician Jinngo with that shade of reproach she reserved exclusively for him—she nearly pressed her chin to her neck, looking out from under her brows.

"I'm not on about that now, Jinngo. Let them worry. My task is not simply to pour oil on the fire, but to do so effectively. Haakon the Good formulated it well, and I have no theological ideas of my own."

"He spent a whole seven pictograms out of thirteen on the word 'god,'" said Prithrea. "On the other hand, the remaining six are not devoid of elegance."

And then the charron heard something he had never heard before. Prithrea sang the formal names of the pictograms:

"'Lose/loss' 'predicate action' 'love/want but be relatively indifferent to having or not' 'predicate context' 'main-insubstantial in position extreme-much' 'be/exist-

ence.' Lovely, isn't it? But a single message won't achieve the goal. People are different, after all. To sow heresy, there's a better way. And a quick way."

At this, she rose from the table, fetched her barrel organ, and heaved it right onto the table. The table groaned piteously. Prithrea changed her mind: she moved the table, with the tray still on it, aside, and set the barrel organ in the center of the square formed by the chairs. Aris had to part with the rapier and lean it in the corner—without the table, he looked foolish with the weapon on his knees.

Prithrea opened the lid of the barrel organ, and everyone set about examining its contents.

"Why did she sing the names, and not the sound codes of the pictograms? Sometimes meanings are sung. But it's the codes that are sung, not the names," Aris asked himself in bewilderment. This strange gesture touched his soul. As Aris walked through life, streams of private, though often primitive, meanings passed him by. A barter-device is thirteen pictograms, a personal message you wear in plain sight. To exchange meanings, you must touch instruments together—like clinking glasses. Aris with his hump… who would want to clink with him? The "keel" of his deformed chest cleaved, without touching, the flows of personal ideas, rumors, public praises and curses, notices of cart sales, invitations to initiation festivities, hints of a desire to meet a future husband.

"You mustn't take it amiss, esteemed charron: I have no scabbard suitable for you. But once we have one custom-made, the weapon will become your second spine—to the precipitate astonishment and demise of your enemies," Prithrea said with a smile, drawing Aris out of his reverie. "You, by the way, could, for a start, immerse yourself in the stream of meanings flowing through the barter-devices, forgoing acts of exchange, simply following the selection procedure. Surely you know that in this case money solves the problem?"

He knew, of course. If you have no intention of performing an exchange, the participation of a second barter-device bearer is hardly required. To simply copy someone else's message, a very light near-touch suffices, without holding the sides. The most expensive instruments, moreover, used complex optics to cast the needed reflections onto the needed micro-mirrors. Then not even a touch was required.

But Aris was troubled by something else now: Prithrea had openly and in front of everyone made reference to his deformity, twice, and yet had made him feel pleased. Jinngo, suddenly yielding to an inner impulse, stood, poured tea, took a

cake, and carried it downstairs to the urchin. The current of air created by the optician's not inconsiderable body, hastening down the stairs, seemed to somewhat lessen the pressure of the stench.

"Come on," Prithrea formed the word, holding her barter-device literally under the charron's nose. "Let's see what you've got there."

There was not a grain of challenge or demand in her voice. Not the tiniest elemental of contempt, disgust, nor indeed—any expectation of anything at all. It was a proposal of exchange utterly level in its boundless plane. As if a vast stone heath presented itself to a traveler emerging from a gorge: "Pass through me, wanderer, you've nowhere else to go anyway." Thus Aris heard it. Therefore, he took out his meaning-stamp and with the crisp thrust of an experienced archer touched it to Prithrea's mechanism.

"Now that's splendid," said Prithrea, stowing the instrument without glancing at the message. And she addressed them all: "Now watch."

In the sounds of scraping chairs, the charron sensed the common reaction: "It's about time! High time." By then, the jumbled heap of stolen personal effects on the fruit tray had begun to transform from a shared experience of chaos, which could theoretically serve the good cause of bonding, into a burden. The stolen goods had to be disposed of immediately. This sensation was greatly aided by the stench that had filled the room, wafting up from below. Virgilia dashed for the window; Prithrea halted her with a light motion of her wrist.

"Go on, take from the heap those bearing the most hidebound meanings, the most churchly, the most doctrinated. Place them here," Prithrea indicated a spot in one of the corners of the open barrel organ.

Prithrea took a couple of oranges from the kitchen counter: "May I?" She looked at the mistress of the house.

"Otherwise I'll forget," and with these words she stowed her little orange booty in a compartment for things inside the barrel organ, to the side of the main mechanisms, which currently held no wound springs.

Jinngo, sighing like a weary prisoner, tried to perform the procedure first. Looking at the result and applying mental effort, he translated the resulting message into plain language:

"'Apart from ourselves, god is needed by no one. Including himself,'" he declaimed in a feignedly tragic but sincerely angry voice.

The three looked at Prithrea in astonishment.

"Why are you looking at me—it does it itself," she said, wrinkling her nose in displeasure. "It inverts the meaning. It was some ordinary phrase from a psaltery or something of the sort. It turned out as it turned out."

All they could do was shake their heads and think, "Well, what do you know!"

"God never arrives anywhere. And still less does He come to save. He gives us signs so that He may ask for salvation from us," Virgilia read aloud. "For that, you could hang someone and not sin."

"'One should not seek to speak with god. We have not and cannot have either a common language or a common scale of time,'" Aris announced his result after pausing briefly for the translation.

The stench was already unbearable. They wanted to kick the little ragamuffin out as fast as possible. At last, Virgilia gathered all the "inverted" instruments back into the sack and went downstairs. Jinngo listened intently to their dialogue, so as not to miss the moment when the window could be thrown open.

"Return each one to its owner. Can you do it?"

"How could I not, mistress."

"You remember them all by face?"

"If not by face, then by belly, mistress."

"Return them unnoticed!"

"Each shall get his due, be at peace. Blindness shall deaden their eyes, mistress."

"Do you need money?"

"No, mistress, but I reserve the right to offload the three most vile ones at the ditch market."

The door slammed. The window flew open. Thick, clean air streamed into the room. A shadow of rags darted past the street. Prithrea placed an orange seed on the windowsill, meticulously aligned its meridians, and then flicked it with her finger. The seed shot out the open window like a cannonball.

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Fragment 25. The Resistance of Still Materials

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The orange pip had surely sprouted overnight.

Competence acquired for free can be a heady thing—by the following morning, everyone was still under the spell of the new texts. Normally—and every sensible person knew this—arranging a meaningful sequence of thirteen pictograms required considerable mental exertion. Yet the hurdy-gurdy's mirror of meaning birthed combinations with the ease of a muddy puddle reflecting the pure light of a full moon. Each barter-device lived a small life beneath the crank-case lid and was reborn.

"Where did you get such a marvel?" Virgilia asked.

Prithrea answered:

"I made it while I was in prison. Had the time."

"And how long were you incarcerated? We have no such record of you at the Chancellery."

"Oh, a whole century, give or take," Prithrea joked.

"Indeed," Virgilia mused aloud. "You can't exactly demand a person 'be themselves' without providing a script for how to do it. Even if that person is a rebel, say, or just a criminal. Especially a criminal. People like that rarely have room in their lives for education. To embody meaning in thirteen pictograms? As if they could manage that! Many can't even explain what a predicate is."

The weather had turned pleasant. Bright and cool. Beyond the checkered window, the silk of the sky was soft. The lads settled into the armchairs. The young ladies were at the table. Virgilia served everyone tea in cups with saucers.

"It seems we have reason enough… to celebrate the acquaintance. Discuss plans. But there's no spark," Jinngo admitted, kindling the fire in the hearth. "Short of drowning our sorrows in wine."

"What sorrow? Don't go inventing any. Not today," Virgilia cut him off. "We've a river of things to do. Get you Arganorian garb, camouflage suits, and documents for temporary leave. Scrounge up some money. Aris, do you have any money?"

"Thirty-two tellers. In Volmelftstein I can collect another hundred and one for my last job," the charron omitted that, in light of the majordomo's denunciation, he might not be paid at all.

"And you, Prithrea?" Virgilia asked.

"Not a groat," she said, utterly unembarrassed by her financial insolvency, pulling from her hurdy-gurdy for some reason a large coil of thin rawhide strap.

"As for you, Jinngo, I won't even ask."

"Is such haste really justified?" Jinngo snapped, straining to sound cautious rather than irritated and, especially, not furious.

"Absolutely," Virgilia replied. "The theological crisis has already begun—the ecclesiastical infighting is in full swing. The collapse of local authority will happen any day now, and a political catastrophe, war with Maristea, Volkarium, or even both neighboring lands, is just around the corner. And then—a trade embargo. Followed by famine. If the Makers set out to frighten us, they've succeeded. They chose the most terrifying demonstration."

Meanwhile, Prithrea walked over to Aris, silently gesturing for him to stand and raise his arms. Then she began taking his measurements with the leather strap. Like a tailor.

"Why is that?" Jinngo asked, trying to ignore Prithrea's eccentricities. "There's always some pestilence in this world, and always its victims. One simply must… avoid siding with the pestilence. Why have we become accomplices to the collapse?"

"Weren't you just boasting the other day about shooting out the main city clock for no good reason?" Virgilia countered, but didn't let Jinngo launch into justifications. "I understand, you're probably cooped up within four walls for the first time in your life for a whole day. But believe me, it's the best of all evils at the moment. The quick path back to normal life is cut off for everyone, but you've already been marked by those best avoided. You had luck on the first day of your adventures, but you're inexperienced. You'll get your throat cut if you stay here. If I don't find you a camouflage suit, a faceless mask, and documents, you won't even make it out of the city."

"I confess, I regarded these events merely as extremely curious. The disappearance of the whirlpool in the bathtub! But now… I can't fathom the reason for such panic," Jinngo accepted the fact of his own youth, ignorance, and lack of preparedness with dignity.

Prithrea smiled at Jinngo the optician. She sat at the table, intently stitching together the sections of leather straps. On one of her fingers, a golden thimble glinted intermittently.

"The panic is more than explicable. Every major clan has highly educated advisors. They've explained a simple logical chain to those in power," the questant said. "We live in a cylindrical world. To be convinced of this, one need only look out the window…"

"Purely in a legal sense… I would note," Jinngo interjected, "there isn't a single circumnavigator alive who could attest to that."

Virgilia merely waved him off.

"Attraction to the inner walls of the Cylinder can only be created by its rotation. To prove that, you don't even need to look out the window—an experiment with any saucepan you care to spin will suffice…"

"But the books of the Forebears state that a large quantity of matter attracts unto itself," the optician interrupted again.

Prithrea kept sewing, but now she was watching Jinngo the optician, not her handiwork.

"You're a fool, Optician Jinngo," Virgilia declared. "Firstly, that's unproven. But fine—let's suppose it's true. Let's suppose it attracts. If there were a gigantic lump of matter beneath your feet, somewhere beyond the walls of Avertigo… Though that's absurd on its face! Why would the Makers waste it on something as foolish as keeping you on your feet? They could build another hundred Avertigos with it. Fine, suppose it. But then another lump, the one holding the ocean's water in the sky, would pull you the other way, and you'd hang suspended between them. Upside down."

"Alright, alright," Jinngo said conciliatorily. "Indeed, the absence of Coriole, which is absolutely inevitable with rotation, gives one considerable pause as to where we even are. And what we even are. Fine. I've just learned and understood this. Just as the King of Maristea has, for example. Or the Tsar of Volkarium. Or the Emperor of Arganor. Or the Shah of Solartis. But, as you can see, I'm not

panicking. I'm not egging on the adepts of a religious order to go catch someone in the night streets."

"Let it be known to you," Virgilia said, "that authority always speaks exclusively in the language of apocalypse. The Sovereign, or the Privy Council as in our case, legitimizes its power not through efficiency, but through the mission of keeping the world from falling apart. Primarily because it can't really be useful or competent anyway."

"Sounds like paranoia," Jinngo muttered.

"Not paranoia. Third chapter of the textbook for senior querists. And from the same source: 'In this, the end of the world itself is not required; it suffices to proclaim that 'if we do not stop them now, darkness will fall'; whom 'them' refers to can be modestly left unsaid or conveniently substituted.'"

"Still, I cannot grasp why you are participating in the destruction of that which is crumbling," Jinngo persisted. "Spreading heresy."

"It just happened. That's one. We're not participating all that much. That's two. And three: the heresy turned out not so bad, admit it," Virgilia patiently explained. "Everyone prattles on: the Creator, the Almighty, providence, salvation. Yet we listened today to the noise of those silly, renewed barter-devices, and it turns out, aside from ourselves, no one needs Him. Note—least of all, He Himself."

Jinngo raised an eyebrow but remained silent, allowing the girl to continue.

"Some wait: He will come, He will save, He will show the way. But He never comes. And if He does, it's not for that. Perhaps He sends us signs not to save or punish us, but so that we might save Him. What if? Silently, but He pleads. He pleads with paradise, or with a bark, as now."

"An intriguing heresy," Jinngo sneezed into a lace handkerchief. "But spare me the theology. It's drivel."

"I wholeheartedly agree," said Prithrea. "Time to set the table, no? Hostess?"

A persistent knock came at the door downstairs.

⁂

All four went down. Prithrea stood in the middle of the room. Aris stood behind the door with Prithrea's rapier in hand. Jinngo stood on the other side with Vir-

gilia's personal rapier. Virgilia herself, expertly tamping powder and wadding into the barrel of her service pistol, asked:

"Who's there?"

"Haakon the Good, madam. I heard you were inquiring about me. And now I've nowhere else to turn—I tell you this only out of necessity. I sincerely hope for justice at your hands—I believe I face imminent death. Such is my assessment of the situation. Open up! I'm being pursued."

Virgilia immediately opened the door, and Haakon tumbled into the room. His hands were in manacles with a severed chain link. Blood flowed freely from his wrists. In his shackled hands, he clutched some long, shaped steel bolt, which hampered his movements. He had no sword on him, of course.

"Come upstairs, esteemed Haakon. We will help you," Virgilia said, locking the door behind him not only with the key but also with a massive crossbar of larch timber.

Upstairs, she took the strange piece of iron from him, gave him water to drink, seated him, and asked him to lay his hands flat on the table. She fetched heavy metal snips and attempted to cut through the manacles. Prithrea stopped her efforts:

"Wait. Let me."

She reached out with her fingers toward one of the steel bands, but a shadow crossed her face. She had evidently changed her mind.

"Simpler with the rapier," she said.

The charron stepped forward and handed her the rapier. She, however, said:

"No, no. You do it. I'll teach you. The upper part, near the tip, about a palm's length… it folds sideways, like a penknife. Carefully! Hold your hand right here. Very carefully. On this side. That's it. Again: carefully! Now very gently bring the imaginary line between the tip and the hilt toward the manacles. Picture this line—like a side of a triangle. It—this line—passes through everything. Anything at all. Anything at all! Don't hurt his hand. Lower it just enough so the line passes through the steel of the manacles. No further. You'll see for yourself—the iron will fall away. No further. There. See?"

A chunk fell from the edge of the manacles, freeing Haakon's hand. No visible force had been applied to the steel.

"Now the same with the second hand. That's it—put it away. From the same side, with utmost care, fold the blade back so it's straight again. Done."

In response to the silent question on everyone's face, Prithrea explained:

"No miracles. It's a hair of a god. Its thickness is exactly one element of carbon. Like a sparklette, only solid. Infinitely solid. It passes through any substance, encountering no resistance due to its extreme infinitesimality. But it's a very dangerous thing. Easy to lose a finger or a hand."

"Where did you find such a wonder?!" Virgilia asked.

"I found it in my wanderings."

"And how long were you wandering to find such a thing?"

"Oh, a whole century, give or take," Prithrea joked again.

Virgilia led the old man to the backyard to wash up. She asked Jinngo the optician to go with her to help with the water.

Prithrea and Aris were left alone. The sound of splashing water and clanging basins drifted up from below—Virgilia was cleaning Haakon up. A band of light lay across the table. Dust motes drifted where they pleased.

⁂

"Why are you so strong?" Aris asked.

"I dug the earth for a long time."

"How long must one dig to become so hardy?" Aris asked.

"Oh, a whole..." Prithrea evidently reconsidered joking. "Let me count."

She paced the room, counting on her fingers. Then she said:

"I can't manage it. Let's do it together. The first time I understood this was on the five-hundredth day less thirteen days. Then twice that amount again. Then twice the number of days that resulted from before. Are you counting, Aris?"

"I am."

"So. I doubled only three times, after which I realized doubling was pointless—nothing changed. Then I decided to triple. And I tripled three times. Then I stopped digging. What's the total?"

"One hundred and five thousand, one hundred and ninety-two days," Aris answered.

"There. How many years is that?"

"Two hundred and eighty-eight."

"That's how long," Prithrea postulated.

"Why do you live so long?"

"I don't remember."

"You remember nothing?"

"Why should I? The last ten years or so I recall reasonably well. But I remember that in those first five hundred days less thirteen, I felt something trying to change me. And I resisted. And after that, every time on such a day, I resisted. Today is such a day."

"Will you resist?"

"I won't."

"Because you cannot?"

"Perhaps."

"Could you not break the manacles, or would you not?"

"I would not, for now. But tomorrow I won't be able to. Maybe the day after."

"Why don't you know for certain?"

"I've never before declined the struggle."

"Why now?"

"The sluices I dug are breaking. The river I birthed will burst forth."

"What do you feel?"

"I am beginning to remember, dear Aris. To remember."

"Why did you stop digging?"

"I don't recall yet."

"Why did you start digging?"

"I don't remember. And when I do, I'm not sure I can tell you, dear Aris."

⁂

When Jinngo and Virgilia brought the now-clean old man back up, the questant gave him no time to collect himself.

"Speak," Virgilia demanded as soon as Haakon was seated.

"I'll answer, madam. The world, as you know, has gone mad."

"What's this all of a sudden?"

"Heresy everywhere. Caustic. Cunning. Clever. Pogroms have begun. Man is a wolf to man. A rabid wolf. Have you not stuck your noses outside yet?"

"You can tell us about the street later. Speak of yourself," Virgilia demanded.

"I thought to myself: I'll go ask around, find out who stopped the clock on the tower and why. I go to the town hall, no one wants to answer me..."

"Did you approach them as a member of the Order?" Virgilia clarified.

"What Order... Everyone's running around who knows where. I went in a cassock, of course. But on my own. On my own initiative, so to speak. I grew curious. But they practically threw me out by the scruff of the neck. So then I thought, let me ask a yardman or someone from maintenance myself where they put the bolt. What kind of bolt, I wonder. I grew curious, as I said. In short, to make a long story short, I procured this for three tellers," Haakon indicated the piece of iron. "Though it's not the bolt that pierced the clock, it's a fragment of the broken clock hand. Still counts as evidence, I reckon."

"Well, suppose so," Virgilia said impatiently. "Though evidence isn't your business. Your current good fortune is that I know your type. They seem to recruit you into the Order based on the size of your desire to stick your nose where it doesn't belong. Every single novice..."

"We are adepts, madam."

"...every single adept has a pathological curiosity. Why did you come here? And who is chasing you? And who put you in manacles? What kind of conduct is that, using manacles outside a courtroom?"

"It was your people who shackled me. Questants. Or querists, the bramble take 'em. Spawned a plague of idlers. They opened a case. I just brought them the evidence. They've gone stark mad, truly. And then some churchmen tried to do me in. Barely escaped with my life. Dragged the evidence along as best I could, covered in my own blood... They wanted to hack me up with an axe."

"What churchmen?"

"I don't know."

"Then how do you know they were churchmen?"

"By their gait. They'd changed clothes. But you can never hide the habit of walking in a cassock."

"And why are you still lugging that piece of iron around?"

"That's the piece of the clock hand, isn't it?"

"And what use is it here?"

"It's evidence, madam! Have you also… lost your wits?"

"Enough. Don't be insolent. Fine. Stay with us for now."

"We ought to flee, madam. And you as well," Haakon shook his head sadly. "Though on the other hand, if you yourself don't know what you're doing, then your enemy doesn't know what you're doing either."

Prithrea approached Haakon and touched his shoulder:

"Good Haakon…"

"It's Haakon the Good, actually…"

"Good Haakon," Prithrea said. "Do you need this item right this moment? If not, might it stay with us for a while? Since you'll be staying with us anyway."

Surprised by her manner, or perhaps by her beauty, Haakon merely nodded.

"So then… we should make ourselves scarce, dear Virgilia," Haakon started his old tune. "I'd go with you."

"Do you have money?" Virgilia asked.

"Plenty. Over a thousand…"

Well, of course, Aris thought. *Skimping on food for such a long life.*

"…Only, I fear, we won't get away or buy our way out," the old man lamented. "Couldn't you give us all masks of the Faceless Querists, eh? Formal ones. You must have spares. Your old ones. Eh?"

"How can I give them to you, you shaggy old bramble?" Virgilia flared up. "Without documents?"

"Who am I to teach you, granddaughter. You have a firmabider's tether, don't you?"

"Well, yes."

"So seal a pact with the optician," Haakon pointed rudely at Jinngo the optician with his finger. "He came of full age as of noon today. I should know—his initiation in our temple was at thirteen years. He can now renounce his own father as head of his Line and start his own. Anew. He'll set a lower fee—there's your formal pretext. And an optician with the Chancellery is entitled to three assistants; any pettifogger will confirm that. We, accordingly, will be listed as his aides."

"You have such a celebration today?!" Virgilia's eyes widened at Jinngo the optician.

"I did say there was reason to celebrate," Jinngo said simply.

Prithrea meanwhile finished her handiwork.

"I know that smell. This bodes ill," she said, seemingly to herself.

"What smell?" Virgilia grew wary.

"Like the vicinity of the geysers in the Caldera territories."

"You've been there too?!"

"I wandered, as I said," Prithrea cut Virgilia off, annoyed.

She walked over to the charron and fitted the newly stitched-together straps over his chest and back. Then she inserted the broken clock hand into the ready-made loops; the hand had forged patterns in just the right places, allowing it to hang securely fastened to the charron's wall-flat back.

"Take the rapier," she ordered Aris. "I will teach you. Extend your arm forward. Lean slightly. Like so. Slide the rapier behind your back. Feel for it. There is a space there."

The rapier suddenly slid with a solid clank into a cavity within the clock hand strapped to his back—a space that had been there all along.

"Makes a fine scabbard," Prithrea admired her work.

She circled the charron clockwise, critically examining the result. Then she circled counterclockwise. She went to the window, opened it wide, and gazed intently upward. She sniffed the air.

"Right!" she exclaimed suddenly, decisively. "Now we all go watch the sparklettes in the ocean! To the roof, friends. To the roof! Without delay."

No one understood. Virgilia was the first to recover.

"What sparklettes, Prithrea, dear? Are you in your right mind? That happens once every three hundred years, if that—and only in fairy tales. You're claiming the opposite side of Avertigo is visible right now? That there are no clouds across the entire diameter of the Cylinder? Never mind that it's still a long way until evening."

"Precisely so, Virgilia. Precisely so."

"But I have no access to the roof," was all Virgilia could think to say.

"We'll make one. Bring all the food, all the drinking water, the field stove, coal, all necessary clothing, all weapons, all valuables. And we go to the roof," Prithrea said. "Time is short!"

Everyone remained rooted to the spot.

"All of it and everything!!!" Prithrea pronounced the words such that everyone, including Haakon, immediately bustled about, grabbed things, and began hauling their belongings up to the third floor.

⁂

When the necessary items were gathered upstairs, Prithrea said:

"Ah, I forgot. All the bedsheets too. And mattresses for everyone, if you have them."

They complied with this as well. Everyone stood like schoolboys before the headmaster of a gymnasium.

Prithrea approached the spot where the slope of the roof met the wall. She stroked the lowest load-bearing beam. Then she positioned herself beside it, wrapping her arms around it as if it were the handle of a gigantic shovel.

At that moment, everyone understood that the roof and the walls were separate entities.

A faint, disgruntled creaking was heard. Not just the bottom beam… she tore the entire three-pitched roof free from all the walls. The house groaned with the screech of fasteners yielding to force. Neither the roofing nor the rafters broke or lost their shape. Perhaps the municipal authorities had been right to forbid tampering with the ancient houses.

Silence.

More creaking.

Quiet.

"What in the world are you..." a voice devoid of personal ownership said.

"Mother of mercy," Haakon grunted.

Prithrea heaved the entire roof upward by dozens of paces. The roof flipped in the air and landed on Prithrea's outstretched arm, ridgepole down. The girl tilted and shifted the roof-basin to the side so that one could now climb into it from the room.

She jerked her chin, ordering them to toss the belongings into the upturned roof and jump in themselves. Once everyone had clambered into the absurd contraption, Prithrea maneuvered so that she too ended up inside the "basin" with the others.

"I told you—sparklettes," Prithrea said, pointing at the sky, which was covered in bright stars—the glow of dense, compact colonies of oceanic plankton emitting collective light.

The charron had seen such a thing. Once, long ago, when his mother was still alive. He knew from the reaction of Virgilia, Jinngo the optician, and Haakon that for them, this was a first. On one hand, there was nothing impossible or even strange about it. Everyone had observed, through breaks in the clouds, the grand amphitheaters of landscapes—the ever more distant planes of terrain, lifted by the world's concave surface. The further, the higher.

However, seeing this scene taken to its extreme was impossible due to the negligible probability of a clear sky along the entire line of sight, all the way to the opposite wall of the World. Of course, people knew about the vast fields of luminescent plankton. Schoolchildren are shown individual specimens through minikin glasses in natural science lessons. But to witness *this* from a distance of hundreds of leagues, as tiny, point-like yet brilliant rubies, emeralds, and diamonds—that was an entirely different matter.

No words were spoken. Perhaps because of the torn-off roof. Perhaps because of the inconceivable beauty of Avertigo's sky.

Soon, however, a third reason to marvel presented itself.

⁂

Prithrea pulled from the hurdy-gurdy several shriveled, unsightly chunks of someone's flesh. Without asking permission, she took the charron's hat off, stuffed it into his bosom, and then stretched one of these things over Aris's head through an existing cavity. He merely blinked—the bladder turned out to be semi-transparent, and everyone could see from his face that if anyone other than Prithrea had done this to him, that person would have lost their head. Prithrea tucked some thin intestine, which she drew from the hurdy-gurdy, under the bladder at Aris's neck and began methodically raising and lowering the instrument's lid. The bladder gradually inflated; Aris's head was now inside a lopsided sphere.

"Swim bladder of an ichthyosaur," Prithrea offered a clearly insufficient explanation. "Everyone must do the same. A matter of life and death."

Slowly, but with resignation, the people, one by one, encased their heads in bladders. Prithrea did the same to herself last.

Intoxicated by the heavens studded with miraculous, insistent light, and then bewildered and half-blinded by the phantasmagoria of the bladders, the people did not immediately notice the events unfolding on the ground. From where Jinngo and Aris had arrived by giraffe, from the crest of the watershed, a flow of water was advancing. It grew ever wider. By the time it reached the city, the streetlamps were all at once underwater. And then—the lower two stories. And then—the whole of Alkinoys Street. Now the town hall tower, in its entirety, along with its five clocks, rested at the bottom of a new river.

The people on the roof accepted the fact that the city had drowned in a matter of minutes as something entirely natural—it seemed as though a subterranean river had welled up from below. They understood what was understandable, but a mute question choked them. Was this—the Seventh River?

The charron was too shy to ask, for he knew that the question "What do you know?" is inseparable from the question "How dare you?" And who was he, before his World was born, to ask such questions?

The roof floated gently up in the current and behaved on the water like a middling vessel. Debris floated past, eight wooden penguins, countless pieces of wagons. Aris thought that the sound of bells ringing from underwater produced an exceptionally profound tone.

"Splendid! Freedom," Prithrea said at last, pulling the bladder off her head.

Everyone else followed suit and freed themselves. Old Haakon found enough disgruntlement within himself to rasp:

"Some freedom. Trapped in a nutshell in the middle of a torrent carrying us who knows where."

"Freedom is when there's nowhere you need to rush," Prithrea taught Haakon a piece of wisdom he had missed in his youth, gathering the crumpled bladders and carefully stowing them back into the hurdy-gurdy.

"A shame about the giraffes," the Charron exhaled.

¶

Fragment 26. Saving Judge Ratu

¶

Dead solid bodies often float tolerably well.

"Why are there no survivors?" Virgilia asked Aris, gesturing at the corpses bobbing up here and there in the darkness around the rooftop.

The vessel slid silently downstream. Several pumpkins followed the same course.

"Subsurface gas, most likely," Aris reasoned.

"I smelled nothing," Virgilia countered.

"Bludders," the charron replied, his tone hovering between statement and question. "Besides, the city is hemmed in by the valley. A heavy, malign, odorless gas could have filled the bowl between the hills and displaced all the air required by every living thing."

Virgilia raised her brows, surprised by the charron's conjecture. He elaborated:

"It's my job to sense where the layers of air are. So the arrow flies true. Where it's cold and heavy, where it's warmer and lighter. Air is rarely so perfectly mixed that it's uniform. It lies there, drifts in layers. And some of those movements I can see. Some I just feel—don't know how."

"Volmelftstein, in that case, was fortunate. It stands upon a solitary hill," Virgilia noted. "I hope, I truly hope, that the inhabitants there survived. But how could so much gas have been released from underground?"

Aris did not grasp the question:

"So much as what?"

"I mean, through what sort of hole did it all escape? None of us sensed anything. When a vessel bursts, it is audible. If I snap a splint, it quivers in my hands before it breaks."

"I do not know, Virgilia. Perhaps this is what Prithrea spoke of when she was impressing something about a caterpillar upon Jinngo and me. Who knows, per-

haps calamity—like that caterpillar—creeps up without a rustle. And certainly without a tremor."

Barely had dawn broken when Virgilia woke Jinngo, demanded his spyglass, clambered to the highest point of the roof swaying in the murky current, and, pressing her eye to the optics, carefully surveyed the surroundings. She adjusted the focal length of the instrument several times, studying the new river at various distances. Jinngo was, on one hand, somewhat piqued that the initial reconnaissance had not been entrusted to him. On the other hand, however, he basked in pride over his remarkable optics.

"Well, it's simple enough," she pronounced her verdict at last. "The displaced reality has returned. The valley of gardens between the cities proved to be stage dressing—it collapsed downward. Likely due to the shifting of strata when Coriole quaked. We are moving along the old riverbed, which was once filled in with loose soil."

Jinngo felt compelled to offer his own view on the nature of the phenomenon:

"This place remembered what it was. Or never fully forgot," he rephrased Virgilia's words with a businesslike air.

He had slept well. He appeared to be in good spirits. Haakon, much to Jinngo's chagrin, was still asleep, so there was as yet no opportunity to inquire whether he had slept well. More importantly, this reduced the optician's audience to Aris alone. Prithrea had taken to her bed with a fever shortly after their departure, if one could call it a departure. She was now lost in a fitful slumber.

"We sail for Volmelftstein," Virgilia gestured ahead with a wave of her hand. "There we shall find a physician. The route is winding, but there is no point in disembarking. Waiting is the swiftest course. How is she, Aris?"

"She sleeps. Delirious, at times," the charron replied, having remained steadfastly at her bedside. "But she is not feverish. Overexertion, I hope."

"I should think so. Where does she draw such strength?" Virgilia shook her head, but her attention was once more seized by the water: "The river never truly left, can you imagine? It waited for the world's slightest misstep in order to return. I recall, during our lessons at school, we debated: how could Volmelftstein stand not upon the Great River? But it seems we had not lost the knowledge—we had lost the question we ought to have asked: 'Who filled in this riverbed, and why?'"

"I hear professional disappointment," Jinngo smirked. "Instead of investigating an apocalypse—a simple inventory: the piece of evidence has been returned to its designated shelf."

Aris suddenly interrupted them, pointing toward a pair of barn doors floating with the current. A figure lay sprawled upon them. Neither that "raft" nor their own small craft possessed any means of steering—they could only wait and see if the two would converge.

"Too late, the carrion birds are already pecking at his brains," Virgilia examined the figure through the glass. "The man's in a judicial robe!"

"Did you know," Jinngo interjected, displaying a lack of regard for the stranger's death, "that the Forebears had two hemispheres to the brain, not three coequal segments like us?"

"Co-equality is a matter of debate; the medical magisters offer no definitive answer," Virgilia sobered him. "What has come over you today, Jinngo? A flood is insufficient cause to abandon one's dignity."

"Take a closer look, Virgilia," the charron interrupted again, his archer's eyesight registering some movement.

She peered more intently.

"You are right. There, beneath the raft… beside the raft, there is someone. Clinging on. Too weak to climb aboard, perhaps. Or perhaps wary of the birds. Possibly tangled or snagged and unconscious."

Virgilia looked helplessly at Aris:

"But what can we do? We have not even an oar; we cannot shift our course."

⁂

"Aris," Prithrea's faint voice made Aris start. She had raised herself onto an elbow. "Fetch me an orange from the barrel organ, please. I shall tell you what to do now."

Aris was at her side in an instant.

"Dear Aris," she whispered directly into his ear.

She managed a weak smile.

"What a foolish name. I shall call you Sira," she stressed the first syllable. "And you shall call me Emma. I remembered, Sira. I remembered."

"What did you remember, Emma?"

"That is for later. But now... do this..."

She whispered to him, and he listened.

"Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"This is my burden. Fear not the sin. When you have done it, lean close to me. I have much more to tell you. I shall sleep now."

The charron gathered all the bed sheets. He laid them out in neat rectangles, edge to edge, across a broad expanse of the roof's slope. He fastened them together with a tool retrieved from the depths of the barrel organ. He attached Prithrea's slender straps to the four corners of the resulting sail. He gathered all four long tethers and bound them together at the end into a knot. He removed the head from one of his arrows. He lashed himself to the roof with a strap. He lashed himself to the tethers. He placed the arrow against the center of the fabric panel. He loosed the shaft into the sky.

The sail soared aloft, to the heights where the wind always roams, unfettered by the friction of the earth. For an instant it hung suspended, as if deliberating, and then—it snapped the tethers taut with such force that Aris heard Prithrea's straps sing. Bracing his feet against the ridge beam and pinning them down with the keel of his hump for good measure, he harnessed the celestial power. The roof, obedient to his will, cleaved the water and began closing the distance to the raft. When the doors bumped against the side with a dull thud, the charron released three of the four tethers, and the sail drifted down onto the deck in a silken stream.

Taking up his rapier, he leaped onto the doors. The raft swayed beneath him, but Aris kept his footing. He stepped carefully to the edge and lashed the raft to their vessel with a line. Then he hoisted the corpse, defiled by the birds, and hurled it into the water with a single powerful heave.

Two hands clung to the edge of the door in a death grip. One was young, the other wrinkled. The edge of the raft submerged under Aris's weight as he approached them, and two mouths lost their air. Without hesitation, he seized the old woman by the wrist and wrenched her toward him. He hauled her out, laid her on her back, and with a sharp, forceful thrust to the chest expelled the water from her lungs. Another compression. And another. At last, the woman broke

into a racking cough, rolled onto her side, and curled into a sodden, trembling knot.

"She lives!" he shouted to his companions. The line drew taut, arresting the drifting roof.

The charron gathered his strength. He returned to the second hand and bent over it. The fingers clenched; eyes full of horror stared up at him through the gap between the planks. He pulled the head up from beneath the raft by the hair, and then, with the hair of a god, removed half the skull. Within were two hemispheres, not three. More precisely—they were now quarters of a brain that had become dead but a moment ago.

"Dead!" he shouted again toward the vessel.

The corpse of the two-hemisphered man sank of its own accord beneath the murky water.

The charron hauled in the line, slung the limp old woman over his shoulder, climbed aboard the vessel, and severed its connection to the raft.

⁂

"That is Judge Ratu. I know of her," Virgilia stated. "That is to say, I know of her existence, not her person."

The judge lay wrapped in dry sheets. All could see her body trembling. Her professional robe was drying in the faint breeze.

The commotion at last roused Haakon the Good.

"What is all this?" he asked in the most general terms.

"We plucked her from the current. Possibly even saved her," Virgilia replied. "She is a judge from Volmelftstein. Not a supreme justice, but an important one…"

"I know, I know what manner of bird she is," he chuckled. "So, the potentates too possessed the weakness and the insolence to grow accustomed to the notion that nothing could ever happen."

Virgilia did not care for his tone:

"Why do you gloat, you old fool? First Jinngo forgot all sense of decency, and now you."

"This is why!" Haakon drew from beneath his cassock a symbol of faith; reflected glimmers ran along the thick chain about his neck.

Virgilia arched her left brow in question.

"You know, of course, that we in the Order regard the Forebears not only as Ancestors but also as the Makers?"

She nodded and uttered the formula customary in such cases: "I respect the reflection of Faith in the mirror of your Soul."

"A forgery," Haakon spat. "The Inviolable Formularies state that 'religious figures are granted supra-territorial status. Their persecution is forbidden'..."

"I am aware, Haakon. I am also aware that no one has believed in the political independence of clerics from their cradle-states for a long time, spare me the rest. You are suspected of spying for the Volkarium. It has always been so. It shall always be so. How does the judge figure into this?"

"When my grandfather served at the temple, the Square of Two Churches was called the Square of Three Churches. Besides the Fatherate and the Order, there was simply the Church. Our own, local one. The theological distinctions were subtle. For instance..."

"I know, I know. The Makers are not creators, but Progenitors, which is something distinct. You hinted that something is amiss with the judge. What?!"

"How is one to speak with you, esteemed hostess? Pah. In short: if you believe that yesterday's surplus groats... a groat here, two groats there in price changes— are not part and parcel of the same calamity," Haakon swept his hand around, indicating the flood, "then you are mistaken."

"Ah, so the secular authorities, by either interfering in the squabbles of the churches or, conversely, by failing to protect one of them, have angered the Progenitors or whomever else. And so the world collapsed. You could have said so plainly from the start," Virgilia concluded the conversation. "I shall go warm up some food. Jinngo, prepare the portable stove for me, if you would be so kind."

⁂

"You know what, Jinngo," Virgilia said abruptly, her irritation mounting further. She stepped back a couple of paces from the stove, impatiently beckoning the optician with a crook of her right hand. "You have been riding on my coattails long enough. Attend to the provisions yourself."

Haakon, meanwhile, had settled down to fish.

Virgilia made her way—insofar as the term applies to the ungainly hobbling along the inner slopes of an upturned roof—to the charron. She took him firmly by the shoulder and drew him to the very prow of the vessel. There they sat facing the direction of travel, their legs dangling down.

"Aris."

He met her gaze openly.

"I can, of course, pretend that everything is under control. But I require information. Otherwise, we shall not survive. We will be killed, or we shall tear one another apart. I find I can scarcely contain myself even now, as you see. Who is she?" Virgilia asked intently, then cast her eyes about them: "What has she told you regarding all this?"

Haakon's fishing efforts met with almost immediate success. With a loud exclamation, he jerked a fish from the water and tossed it at his feet. The silver body of the thrashing creature danced between the inverted rafters.

"I believe she knows far more than we do, but she cannot speak of it. Because either—and here you are right—we would kill her for it. Or else we ourselves would be killed."

"You are lying."

"Not in the least. She merely gave me a task… And I believe that now she is just an ordinary person. She is ill from the loss of her power."

⁂

The charron, who had not technically uttered a falsehood, was spared further unpleasant inquiry by the Effigy. Around a bend in the New Channel of the River, a cliff came into view, carved with the visage of the First Chancellor. The deep bas-relief stood three or four townhalls high. It was the face of a relatively young man with a lofty brow. Otherwise, there was nothing remarkable about it.

"Further argument that we are traveling an ancient riverbed. The Effigy is situated in a logical place to greet travelers plying the waters between the cities. This spot is likely the halfway point."

"Yes," Virgilia agreed. "Before, one had to make a special journey to see it. Did you ever go?"

"Of course. I think everyone has. At least once. Though I myself went only once. As a schoolboy. They say the faces in other lands are more interesting. Ours is

somewhat bland. Like a spy who resembles everyone at once. Not a single distinguishing feature."

Beside the spot where Haakon sat, several fish now danced their final dance. Jinngo joined him.

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Fragment 27. The Post-Diluvian Dances of Prithrea's Five Bladders

¶

Prithrea quietly approached Virgilia and Aris from behind. Crept up, to put it plainly. She had two oranges in her hand. She leaned playfully on Aris's shoulders. He flinched, then broke into a wide smile.

"Telling secrets?" Prithrea asked cheerfully, handing one of the fruits to Aris. As she did so, she gazed at the Effigy slowly drifting past. "Grandiose, isn't it?"

"You've come around? Well, thanks be to the Forebears," Virgilia fussed. "Come, let me feed you, dear. No waiting in line."

Prithrea gently pressed her back into her seat by the shoulder and sat down beside her. "Later," she whispered. Aris found himself seated between the two girls. The charron and Prithrea peeled the oranges, separated them into segments, and shared them with Virgilia.

"I know that woman," Prithrea said, no longer whispering but speaking softly. "You need to take her with you if you really want to reach the smugglers' den. You'll hand her over as payment for a service. Don't steal from them. Theft is fundamentally impermissible. I would know. Things were stolen from me—not just objects, but pieces of my life's memory. The consequences can be unforgivably monstrous."

"What are you talking about? What service? I just want to ask them questions. Same as you, by the way. How did you even blow that roof off? How did you know about the flood in advance—by smell? But there was no smell at all," Virgilia was beginning to boil over again.

"Let's take it one at a time. From the more practical to the less practical. Deal?"

Virgilia, instantly calming, nodded.

"What do you know about the smugglers' operations?" asked Prithrea.

"I know what everyone knows. They ferry goods out to the upper lake, into the formal waters of the Caldera. Drawing borders there is impossible due to the simple fact that all the rivers flow out of that lake."

"Well, what are you staying quiet for?" Prithrea leaned her shoulder into Aris.

"Deals are struck there through one's own firmabiders, since only a person conditioned from childhood can endure such thin air," the charron supplied.

"That's it. Nothing new, nothing cunning," Virgilia summed up.

"And how do they deliver goods to the river deltas, to the customs houses?" asked Prithrea. "How? Formally, only goods arriving by sea are considered extraterritorial."

"Everyone knows that too: they send them down from the lake through the rocky gorge of the Sixth River, which isn't even a river, really, but a mountain stream," Virgilia replied with a gesture of bewilderment.

"Oh! How huge!" Jinngo yelled.

"How? Do they go on foot, or what?" Prithrea nudged Aris with her shoulder again and smiled at him, as if to say: look what a funny, naive friend we have.

Aris beamed like a nursing infant. Prithrea tousled his cheek.

"How about I give you, our dear archer, an ichthyosaur bladder?" she said to him out of the blue. "To keep. What if we suffer a shipwreck… or rather, a roofwreck, huh? You'll float."

Prithrea made as if to rise, but Aris wouldn't let her. He went to fetch the barrel organ himself. On the way back, he put on a brave front, but a careful observer would have noticed his legs and arms trembling under the weight. "Thank you, sweetheart," Prithrea whispered in his ear. "I couldn't have managed anymore."

She opened the lid and took out a shriveled bladder. In the daylight, it shimmered pinkish. Aris was not certain it was the same bladder he had worn yesterday. From two different leather pouches, she took a pinch each of a black and a gray malleable substance, kneaded them into one lump, and placed it inside the bladder.

"Now blow it up," Prithrea held the fold of the desiccated flesh of the bladder to the charron's lips. He exhaled into it a few times, and the bladder gradually blossomed. What's more—it bobbed slightly upward in the air.

"Clay from old nests of special little bees heats the air if you let them eat," the girl whispered to the charron with a charming, self-satisfied smile.

Aris continued blowing. When the bladder was tugging briskly skyward, Prithrea deftly tied it to Aris's belt with a cord. The bladder, glimmering pink, strained at its tether and floated above the charron's head at about the height of a man.

Jinngo was delighted by the sight. But he did not rise or let himself be distracted from his fishing. Instead, on his third try, he grabbed one of the fish thrashing against the deck and smacked Haakon on the head with it, as if to say: look at this marvel. It was fortunate that the Good had his cassock's hood pulled up.

"I have no information on how they resolve the issue of delivering contraband goods," Virgilia was diligently answering Prithrea's question in the meantime. "I suppose they carry sacks and crates down on foot. On stretchers. In teams of four. Not by cableway, surely. What are you driving at?"

"The cableway thought is sound, except the goods need to reach the river deltas further on," said Prithrea.

"Then they build boats right there, at the mouth of the Sixth River!" Virgilia said in irritation.

She brushed aside Aris's hand, which he had extended to interject a remark:

"Disposable boats! Of course, I know you can't get there along the whole coast of the Fiverivers region because of the currents. It seems to me you're trying to talk me in circles and confuse me, Prithrea. I wouldn't advise it," she threatened.

Prithrea threw up her hands in mock indignation:

"You need a bladder too!"

"Jinngo," she called out playfully. "Come help. Your friend is fighting."

"Hey there, Haakon!" she waved to the old man, utterly absorbed in his fishing. "I've a notion you're not so good today. I'd wager you've heard that joke a hundred chiliads of times."

Prithrea burst into loud, ringing laughter, jumped to her feet, and even executed a couple of dance steps. Although she immediately staggered and nearly fell. Aris caught her. For an instant, her face turned a burnt gray, but she smiled again at once.

The optician came over as quickly as the awkward circumstances allowed.

"You snapped out of it! Unbelievable!" he said with a strangely belated greeting. His eyes gleamed with an unhealyour shine. "And look at us, catching fish. How'd you blow that roof off for us, huh? I'll be honest, after that business in the jail, I thought you'd tricked us somehow. And I was sleepy, I don't remember a thing. But yesterday I saw it with my own eyes. What are you, some kind of titan? And if you and Aris have kids, will they get half the power or the whole thing?"

Prithrea turned to the charron. He stood there neither alive nor dead.

"Go, sort things out with your friend," she bestowed upon Aris a merry street-performer's "tra-la-la" gesture and a dazzling smile besides. "He's impugning my dignity. Blow up a bladder for Virgilia. Heck, blow one up for everyone. Here you go. Different colors. Watch now, I'll check."

Prithrea herself returned to her conversation with Virgilia, her face quite serious.

"I wish I knew for sure how the smugglers operate! Oh, how I wish I did. But I," she put on a conspiratorial look, "merely unite rumor and logic into a whole. So, be so kind as to understand: I have neither self-interest nor any other need to deceive you. Alright?"

Virgilia nodded again, her brow movements acknowledging her own lack of constructiveness. The dance of the maddened fish across the entire deck of the vessel increased its multitude of silver bodies. Imminent death granted them their sole festival, that moment when life becomes sovereign.

"You'd need a fast-growing forest for that, a bamboo forest, for instance," Prithrea spoke very rapidly. "But it's eternal winter down there. Besides, no one has ever seen such boats. They have ordinary boats that travel ordinary routes."

The charron smiled, watching how a blue bladder floated in the air above Virgilia and a turquoise one above the optician Jinngo.

"If you want to learn something substantial, you have to traverse their entire route. Including at sea, where their main transshipment base is. Where, I might add, no one has been. Does the Chancellery not have any data on where they repackage goods before shipping them to the deltas?" Prithrea probed. "Bladder up the old man and the old woman, dear Jinngo, if you'd be so kind. It's fun!"

"No," Virgilia confirmed. "The archives are empty on that subject."

"I think the reason that place hasn't been found to this day is that it's some kind of anomaly on the Cylinder's wall. And there—I dream of it so—there might be a

little window to the outside world!" Prithrea nudged Aris. Her eyes blazed with ecstasy.

"Want to go to the bamboo forest, want to go to the bamboo forest," Jinngo sang, inflating a mustard-colored bladder for Haakon between musical phrases.

"And that place is at sea," Prithrea proclaimed. "And you can't reach it any other way except from that rocky river. Apparently, that's how the currents are set up. From there, to the deltas—no problem. The boats are carried along at a whistle. The sea itself will carry them, can you imagine?"

"Where did you scoundrels manage to get drunk?" Virgilia shifted her gaze from one member of the vessel's crew to another.

"Just steer the rudder in whichever direction you need. But going back—impossible. So you have to make a detour like that. And they go down in boats, of course, not on foot."

"What kind of boats would you need to slide down a mountain stream?!" Virgilia marveled. "It would smash anything to splinters."

"Stone ones," Prithrea punched the air with her fist.

"How's that?!"

"Cast from lava!"

"What would you make such severe casting molds out of, Diligent Forebears, to withstand the fire of Avertigus?"

"I don't know. We have to find out! In my collection of metals," she rocked her barrel organ from side to side so that it clinked, "there are none like that!"

At last, the old woman came to. The first thing she discovered was a bladder floating above her.

"I greetss you, good people. I sspeak with the purposse of..." she began a formal address, apparently believing that one must remain correct even in the afterlife.

She was wrong to start speaking, the charron realized, observing the mounting insanity.

"Oh, plug up your talker!" Prithrea snapped at the judge. The old woman shut up instantly, and Prithrea pressed the attack: "Just imagine that formal language is merely an accidental legacy of the Makers' attempts to flee from their creations. Where did you even come from? Speak! And I know why you survived."

By the end of her statement, Prithrea was hissing like a snake.

"From mother's womb!" Haakon bellowed for the whole area to hear.

"Where iss my boy?" the old woman looked around in a daze. "Where iss my robe?"

Voices answered Haakon's shout from the shore. Indistinct loud cries. There, on the edge of the new abyss formed by the collapse of yesterday evening's bank, people stood waving their arms. Day had come into its own, rumors had spread through the precinct, and locals were beginning to gather to see the new River with their own eyes.

Some were already engaged in looting, using long gaffs to drag floating bodies toward the land in order to strip them of clothing, purses, shoes, wigs. On some dead faces, even pince-nez remained—so peaceful had been their death and subsequent journey in the current. The dead men's optics also migrated into the looters' pockets. The same thing happened with barter-devices. Aris, with the eagle eye of a charron archer, noted these mournful events, reflecting that following the flood of water and mud into Volmelftstein came a wave of heresy—no one in the pawnshops would bother with nullifying messages.

"And the Makers were born of language," Prithrea meanwhile dealt heavy words to the terrified judge's face, staring her down. "Just language. Ordinary, human language. And for their escape, they used something that one cannot even converse on."

"I caution you that you are showing dissresspect to my clan..." the old woman tried to defend herself against the rampage of cultural and theological incorrectness.

"And do you know what your clans are for?" Prithrea was unstoppable. "The Makers peeked at the Forebears and saw that characters like you don't need knowledge, or even money, but a position in society. So whenever the economy gradually expands down the mountain slope, the climatic shift is just waiting to return everything to its place. Back into the hands of those same clans. Every five hundred minus thirteen days. Know why? So as not to disrupt the contours of reproduction, that's why!"

Everyone on the boat exchanged glances of feigned surprise like a hot potato. In truth, no one was surprised by anything. Haakon slipped on a fish and crashed down onto the roof.

"And where are all the boats from the city?" asked Jinngo. "Why is it so dull on the River?"

"They were all down at water level. They were swept away and overturned by the first strong surge. Would you have thought to moor your boat to an attic, my clever Jinngo? You would have thought of it, I know," Virgilia nearly sang, concealing Aris's guess about the gas from everyone.

Five colored bladder-balloons bobbed above the absurd vessel like a festive garland. More and more people greeted them from the shore. The river was gradually widening, and words could no longer be made out. Prithrea laughed with joy more and louder than anyone. Aris merely smiled, utterly dissolved in his adoration of her.

"What wonderful bladders," Prithrea exclaimed. "Haakon! You shall be a bladder-sovereign. Virgilia—you are a muscle-bladder! Judge—you are an anchor-bladder. Jinngo—a maestro-bladder..."

Prithrea grew short of breath and bent double. Aris was at her side in an instant, scooped her up, and sat her down next to him. She caught her breath and said, into the silence:

"How about I sing for you instead. Sira, hand me my barrel organ, if you'd be so kind. Someone give me an orange."

⁂

Prithrea opened the barrel organ and, wasting no time on warming up or preparation, began to play. She did not turn the organ's crank. The organ had no crank. Instead, beneath its lid were psaltery strings. She sang and accompanied herself. Gooseflesh raced across the entire surface of Aris's body in large patches. Something was happening just above the skin as well. But that was for after the music. While she performed, he did not feel his body at all. He sincerely believed himself to be a much better, smarter, and more elevated person than he truly was.

"She kindles light, she scatters shadows," Haakon said when Prithrea finished.

"Wow," was all Jinngo said.

"That melody... could it be ssewn into one of the wire circuitss of your barrel organ?" asked the judge, not calibrating the formality of her phrases, yet not switching to the familiar form of address.

"It could. It's my music." Prithrea answered the judge but looked at Aris. She knew how beautiful she was. And she did not hide this knowledge. The open lid of her instrument swayed hypnotically.

"Are you required by law to usse only your own compositionss in mechanical retroaction?" the judge continued to ask, prompting everyone present to wonder what compelled a jurist by education to take an interest in laws.

"Not at all." Prithrea shrugged with that gesture peculiar only to pretty girls. "A barrel organ isn't music. It's perfidy. Squandering an image by retail. But! The resemblance of a barrel organ's melody to a true performance has an 'owner.' Not the melody itself has an owner, though that too. The resemblance! Likenesses of the original can multiply like fungi by spores. Series of likenesses are not subject to hierarchy."

"But by making variationss out of necesssity, you part with ever new portionss of your ssoul each time, do you not?" the judge probed.

"Yep. That's why a creator mustn't play their own music too often themselves," the girl said. "But performing for friends reveals a new aspect. I show you what no one has seen. I bring 'inaudibility' to the forefront. I give a tangible equivalent. But it's a special kind of tangibility that allows the tips of your fingers to touch the inside of your body. In such a performance, only for friends, one should renounce an abstract song about something abstract. Someone else's. The subject of these feelings must be real. Only then can the revealed non-existent borrow its form from the existent."

"If the Maker iss referred to in the singular, iss that not a hidden acknowledgment that He nevertheless wass?" asked the judge. "And could you play ssomething a bit more cheerful?"

"Have you ever heard cheerful ditties, Jinngo?" asked Prithrea, ignoring the judge.

"I've had occasion to," the optician replied.

"Then you must know what it's like. Music is meant to engender rapture, a poignant joy in the soul. Alright, perhaps 'meant to' is too lofty a phrase. But music can do that. It definitely can. And it does so in person: like an intimate interlocutor, creating a sensation inside, exclusively. And in such music, there's no place for humor. No one seeks a pretext for laughter just to chuckle with themselves. Wrong genre. A well-constructed conversation or even a monologue is a priori funnier. Where can you hear a cheerful ditty? Among drunken steve-

dores in a tavern. The humor will be third-rate. The melody worse still. A collective amusement. Pfah. Is that music? It's the same with the Maker and with Nature. Strictly singular."

Prithrea lay down with her head in Aris's lap. "I'm a bit tired." Never beneath the fearsome keel of a charron had anyone… He did not finish the thought, so as not to spoil it. Prithrea whispered to him, and he listened. Prithrea whispered to him, and he listened on.

"Why Sira?" he asked just one thing.

"I had… a person, my dear. Well, he used to invert the letters of his impunity in a very funny way."

⁂

The banks had grown tall. The fluvial processes had once been grand. A vessel was making its way down the new river. A real vessel. Its captains had little use for the current alone. Little use for the wheel traction provided by five pedal oarsmen. They had no masts for fore, topsails, or topgallants. They had no masts at all. This did not prevent them from hoisting high into the sky an improvised flying jib and fore topmast staysail. They ordered two sailors to manifest, by lines and their own hands, a mizzen gaff. Like a thin husk of a split almond, the vessel glided along the brown river. The crew's dazzlingly white wide trousers flickered beneath their dark pea coats. Their flat caps flashed under the captains' shouts. Only the two captains in black, from head to toe, remained motionless.

"So we meet, Emma," shouted a man in black.

"Is that you, Crows?" Prithrea recognized them. She spoke softly, but they evidently heard her. "Have you come to feast on carrion in the muddy torrent?"

"We are. But we're Rooks now, dear. We've had to take up social engineering."

"What's happened to the world?"

"Avertigus lost a game of dice to someone, evidently. A couple of waterfalls' worth."

"But waterfalls don't bother anyone, do they?"

"Oh, in your place, we wouldn't worry about others' losses. You don't think your examination was limited to thirty-three foolish wolves, do you?"

"You yourselves said, 'that's it, you've passed.' I remember now."

"We said that to ourselves. One shouldn't believe such a thing. No, not passed yet. Neither you, nor us. The matter is a serious one..."

"You don't believe someone who talks to their own brain hemisphere, especially when there are only two and not three, do you?" the other Rook interjected sarcastically.

"She probably took offense at being saddled with an unfair deal. Memory for power," said the first Rook. And immediately compounded the insult: "Incidentally, I don't believe you either, Rook."

"As if you'd understand fair deals, Rook," answered the other Rook. "Before, they'd take a life for memory, a life that had only just begun. How many billions of great consciousnesses have come and gone for one brief conversation with a stupid half-bird."

"The half-birds themselves, Rook, stand upon millions of years of genocide against everything and everyone, millions of species, including birds..."

"Stop your cawing already," said Prithrea, "you've become tiresome."

And she ceased to pay them any attention herself.

"Farewell, my Sira," she drew the charron's head to her own and kissed him on the lips. Then she studied his face carefully. "Give my regards to everyone."

Aris froze.

"And my behest," she winked at him merrily and fell asleep at once, her head falling back.

The two men in black leaped high from their vessel, spreading cloaks that seemed to have some sort of webbed inserts in mid-air, and landed softly on the inverted roof of Virgilia's former house.

They stood and looked at Aris expectantly.

"He won't be able to," one said to the other.

"Hey, lady," one of the rooks tossed to the judge. "Got any firmabider's tethers? Witness the death."

He walked over to Prithrea's body and, with an imperious, casual gesture, bade the old woman approach. She obeyed. Then, taking the red tethers offered by Virgilia, she went through all the prescribed procedures like a somnambulist,

from confirming the absence of breath to fastening the tethers in the designated places on the body.

No one uttered a word.

And then the Rooks flew away. Taking the body, leaping back onto their vessel, unfurling upon it high-flying sails without masts, departing at a brisk pace against the current, but with the wind.

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Fragment 28. The City as Cover

Rivers can be dry. Now the water was returning to the old moat around Volmelftstein. The bottom, which whole centuries ago had become strawberry meadows, met the turbid stream. Perhaps one cannot enter the same river twice, who knows, but into the same bank—it had worked. But the main question—had the observer essentially remained the same? That was all that interested the charron now.

All five stood at the vessel's prow.

"The whole," Virgilia folded the spyglass and handed it to Aris, "I repeat: the entire city wall is studded with people. There's a crowd there. Are they greeting us? What an absurd phantasmagoria."

"Then the roof lagged little behind the front of the current," said the charron. "Evidently, much of what flowed ahead of us seeped under the loose soil. They are greeting the water, not us."

"They are greeting the river, not the water. And a river iss not water," said the judge. She was clad in her dried and cleaned robe. "A river iss the form that water assumess. Form iss more sstable than content."

"Truly so," Aris thought, looking at her robe, which now took on a most imposing appearance in the wind. Aloud he warned:

"We have an agreement, Ratu."

The judge gave a restrained nod.

"Everyone to your places!" the charron commanded. "I'm beginning."

Jinngo took his stand at the very prow. His face was turned forward. His posture was magnificent. Behind him, in a triangle, stood Virgilia and Ratu. One level farther back and wider—Haakon and Aris.

The charron descended to the bottom of the vessel, where at the lowest point stood the weighty barrel organ of Prithrea, ensuring a low center of gravity. Each person was tied to it by a line around the ankle. The plane formed by the upper edges of the overturned roof was draped with stretched bedsheets—the vessel

now had the illusion of a smooth, flat deck. Aris pulled an improvised plug from the bottom—a stopper of trash bound into a clump with twine. He waited until the roof took on water so that the water touched the "deck," hiding it beneath itself by a finger's length. After that, he submerged his head and plugged the hole again. Now, instead of a strange vessel, four vertical figures floated upon the water—the craft itself was underwater. The people did not stir. Soon the four effigies were joined by a fifth—the Charron Aris. The watercraft itself was difficult to notice. Evening was falling fast. Water streamed off the charron as he donned the bladder.

"Don the bladders!" came Aris's second command.

Each of the five people pulled a bladder over their head. Each inflated their bladder from within, using a piece of thin gut from Prithrea's toolkit. They tried to take shallow breaths to increase the share of living air. Each chewed and moistened a piece of some "clay"—also from the barrel organ. Each pressed the clay between their front teeth and left a grin upon their face. The clay glowed with a soft light. Twilight deepened.

The river approached the city wall. At its head floated five standing figures, with an otherworldly radiance around their bare heads. The mutual configuration of the figures—an arrowhead—remained unchanged. The point moved majestically from the place where the current entered the circumferential moat to the wide bridge by the seventh tower. From the walls, from the towers, from the banks of the moat, from the bridge over the moat that abutted the gate of the seventh tower, thousands of eyes watched them. Thousands upon thousands. The silence that pressed down upon everything was only made more distinct by a few hysterical shrieks from particularly sensitive souls. The Five floated under the bridge. From above, townsfolk stared at them with all their eyes. Many recognized the judge by sight. From the other side of the wide bridge, which could accommodate four carts abreast, no one appeared. Not after ten heartbeats. Not after a hundred. Never.

The arrival of the River had been accomplished. The river was the same as it had been two centuries ago, for it recognized the city. It recognized all who were present—as anyone does who returns to the site of an old trauma.

⁂

As soon as the arch of the bridge was over the vessel's company, Aris, holding the rapier with the god's hair engaged in his left hand, began rapidly—as fast as he could and even faster—to wind the line connecting him to the weight of Prith-

rea's Barrel Organ. He drew himself underwater, stepping down with urgent side-steps that brooked no delay. Lower and lower. His rapier passed through the hull of the vessel, cleaving it in two. In less than three heartbeats, he was at the very bottom. Aris completed cutting the old roof, pulling himself up the opposite side of the slope, grasping a prepared line. The construction had not drifted even halfway across the bridge's width before it was divided into two parts. Both of them, like drowned men, hastened to the bottom of the canal.

Drawn by the Barrel Organ, the people with air bladders on their heads stepped onto the flooded strawberry meadow and walked in the ominous silence of the underwater space, led by Aris. The water column of seven man-heights above their heads pressed mercilessly. The bladders compressed and lost shape. Guided by what he had heard in Prithrea's Behest, Aris walked toward the foundation of the Seventh Tower. In his hands was Prithrea's Barrel Organ. Prithrea's rapier was a second spine, allowing him to keep his stride unbroken. The glow of the clay in their grins did not let them see the path, measuring out only that minimum of living space which allowed them not to lose their minds. Fortunate were those fish who had ended their lives on the deck of the roof of Virgilia's house, for they did not witness the procession capable of instilling a chilling horror in any eternal soul: the corpse-smiles of the Five, the oral cavities lit from within, the absurdly billowing folds of the clamped membranes around their heads, the taut steps and the impenetrable silence.

Aris pressed the keel of his deformed chest against the infinitely solid wall of the Seventh Tower, at its underwater portion. He set the Barrel Organ on the bottom. He embraced the curve of the tower like the trunk of a giant tree as thick as a village. He began to step sideways to the left, clockwise. He felt out the near-bottom portal and its low gate. In his hand was the key.

⁂

Inside, there was air. A significant mass of water burst into the chamber, but the three men managed to slam the door shut. It proved quite watertight—there were no leaks at the joints. There was light, too. Dim, but light. It became clear that the liquid spreading across the stone floor of the inner grotto was of no consequence—the chamber was enormous. The unsteady light that was present sufficed to confirm: this was a cavern extending far beyond the foundation of the Seventh Tower. Not far off stood a watermill building, through which a brisk stream flowed, originating in a millpond. The water vanished into a huge well. The light emanated from the mill. Not far from the mill stood a shed with a thick stovepipe. Evidently a smiyour and workshop.

The first thing the people examined upon approaching the mill was an enormous, ingenious oil lantern, to which fuel was supplied from a large barrel as it was consumed by the wick. The door was unlocked. The house proved to be three stories tall and narrow, which is typical for mills of this class. On the ground floor there was a hearth, but the room was clearly not a living space. Jinngo kindled a fire using the firewood stored right there.

It was apparent that someone had been here not so long ago. When the fire caught, the people cautiously, in single file, climbed higher. On the second floor, there was nothing but millstones. No traces of flour anywhere. The floor was clean. However, it was too dark here to draw final conclusions. They ascended to the third floor. Jinngo lit a lamp.

"This is definitely Prithrea's house," Virgilia instantly deduced with a questant's eye. "No mistake."

And indeed: she pointed to characteristic marks on the wooden floor. It was evident that a heavy barrel organ had been set down here countless times. It was set down here this time as well. Aris opened it and was relieved to find that the instrument, like the gate, was watertight. Inside, it was dry.

"We'll have to settle the other floors as well," Virgilia said, surveying the cramped room with a proprietorial air.

And so they did, making use of all the fabrics found in the house. For the four missing pillows, they used thin billets from the woodpile. The old folk were lodged at the top, where it was driest and coziest. Virgilia and Optician Jinngo made their beds on the second floor. The charron's place ended up downstairs, by the hearth.

Some food was also found in the house. A multitude of spices, groats, olive oil, pumpkins, dried mushrooms and berries. There was even dried meat.

"We proceed as follows," the charron announced. "Today, we only take food and rest. Starting tomorrow, I will cut a secret overland exit—both of Prithrea's passages are now underwater. The judge prepares documents. The optician works on transparent steel—according to Prithrea's behest. Haakon ponders his part of the strategy. You, Virgilia, are in charge of the household. This is to be understood as your responsibility being the oversight of time and quality, as well as analysis of circumstances."

Everyone listened to this text on reconnaissance in silence and with understanding.

"But first—all lanterns we can find into our hands," said Aris. "We move to the crypt!"

⁂

They walked along a springy, well-trodden path. The charron walked firmly at the head of the group, but there was no certainty within him. "Go to the crypt, she said," Aris tormented himself, "it will help you. You will be able to keep more silent, so you won't be killed for a superfluous word. So she said. And left things unsaid." Prithrea's instruction had been laconic: "Head along the sole path leading from the mill, away from the gate." That was all. They walked about a hundred paces. Nothing but darkness. The cavern ceiling was high, judging by how the echo sounded. Higher than over the mill. The path ended at an enormous stone basin, the size of a house.

"There are steps here," said Virgilia, and climbed them. "It's a bath. There's water here. By the smell—clean."

"Running water," Jinngo confirmed, having inspected the structure from the other side. "This is definitely not a crypt. Anything but a crypt."

"She even took showers here. Here's an aqueduct and a mesh to break the water into streams," said Haakon.

Virgilia walked around the pool a couple of times and fell into thought.

"This is all strange," she waved a hand toward the mill. "What could have compelled her to build this so far from the dwelling? There's no spring here gushing from the rock. The water is brought artificially. Why not make it convenient, near the house?"

"She hated water," said the charron.

No one could offer another answer. They moved on. Another hundred paces or so, and the entrance to a grotto appeared.

"This is even stranger," Virgilia drawled. "If someone showed me such a shape and didn't tell me how large the thing was, I'd think a potter was amusing himself in his free time."

"Indeed," Jinngo stood gaping. "A person wouldn't build like that. Even with a god's hair. Why all these little grooves? So much labor! Superfluous labor. You're right, Virgilia: as if someone ran little rakes for tending houseplants over the rock. Rakes the size of a couple of carts."

The charron's patience was wearing thin.

"Shall we enter?" he half-ordered.

Inside, the wall decor was similar. The floor was perfectly level, and moreover—not paved. It was rock. An ideally flat and horizontal rock, covered with a thick layer of dust.

"She hasn't been in here for a hundred years," Virgilia observed.

Having ventured about twenty paces into the crypt, they felt moss underfoot. They peered closer, touched, sniffed—moss.

"How does it grow in the dark?" the charron marveled.

And another ten paces on, they saw people lying on the moss. Five persons. They lay relatively evenly, on their backs, but not at all like the bodies of the deceased in ordinary family tombs and crypts. Their postures were so natural that none of the five living guests showed fear or even confusion. The bodies of the crypt did not look threatening; no otherworldly chill emanated from them. On the other hand, they did not resemble sleepers either. The charron now understood why Prithrea had described the crypt with the words "there—a comma."

In the depths of the grotto was a catafalque—a black carriage without windows. There was nothing else in the grotto. Not a single object.

"This is the First Chancellor of Illumiros," said Virgilia. "No doubt. How tall he is, it turns out. Young. And bald. Well, well."

"This is the First King of Maristea," Jinngo added, pointing to a dry, stern little old man. "My old man took me on an excursion to their Effigy."

The people moved from figure to figure, examining them with the greatest interest. The charron, however, was most preoccupied with the moss. He tore off several of the thinnest little branches and hid them in his pocket.

"The First Empress of Arganor," Haakon the Good confirmed, standing by an elderly woman, and gave a bow. He had seen her Effigy.

"The Firsst Tssar of Volkarium. And the Firsst Sshahbanu of Ssolartiss," the judge completed the list.

"A great beauty," said the priest of the shahbanu. "Like you, Virgilia. And why is the Tsar so disheveled?"

Virgilia looked with respect at the judge, who had managed to travel in her life, ignored Haakon, and bent toward the body, touching the Chancellor's wrist.

"Alive," she concluded after a while. "An extremely slow pulse, but this is a living person. I think it best not to wake him. Here my analysis is powerless. Our medicine knows nothing of the sort. I won't touch the foreigners, just in case. I'm certain the situation with them is analogous."

The charron smiled. Not at the questant's words, but at his own thoughts.

"Jinngo," he said. "I've just thought of how and why to give you extra work..."

And Aris continued collecting samples of the moss.

"If the judge weren't with us, I couldn't even draw up a conclusion," Virgilia lamented. "What a disagreeable person it was who devised and managed to implant the tradition of not painting the Effigies. Surely some churchman. I'd stake my hand on it. I've heard that once, greeting cards with their stone visages were in circulation."

Haakon, who had been walking about the grotto and grunting with displeasure, finally voiced his grievance to all:

"This is new to me, good people. What a band has gathered," he squinted. "Not a one even thought to fall prostrate."

"And what about yourself?" asked Virgilia, stuffing the blustering old man into a narrow crevice of everydayness.

"For endless dying, we in the Order have no respect."

Virgilia smiled and clapped the old man on the shoulder:

"Our kind of fellow. There's no grandeur where there's no simplicity. Alright, let's go home to the mill now, boil up plenty of groats, dress them with oil, and you'll explain to us how one ought to regard things. And don't judge us too harshly for callousness—we've seen plenty these last days, as you know."

"No formal disspesspect wass dissplayed," the judge confirmed, dismissing the suspicion of a dissonance of ontological proportions.

Deciding that the line had been drawn and the behavioral assessment already entered into a protocol not subject to further correction, Jinngo said:

"Who thought of coming here before lunch, anyway?"

As for the culprit, there was no need to doubt his calm—one had only to see the satisfied look with which the charron patted his pockets, where the bits of soft moss resided.

As they left, each, of course, glanced back. Five bodies lay on the moss—now not like bodies in shrouds, but like discarded dolls. Had there been more light, one could surely have discerned how the eyelids of the most sensitive among them had twitched.

⁂

"A vile aftertaste from these warm mummies, wouldn't you say, esteemed Haakon the Good?" Virgilia hooked the old man, pushing aside her bowl of half-eaten pumpkin porridge. "Neither alive nor dead. A suspension of will. Like all of us in this world, eh? The personification of endless dying, you said? Watch you don't stain the tablecloth!"

They were dining upstairs, at the old folks' quarters. Jinngo and the charron had fashioned a large table from boards found in the smithy. A clean bedsheet served as the tablecloth.

"No one hobbles my free will, dear Virgilia. Nor yours either. We all do as we wish. Until we violate the Inviolable Formularies. You, of course, do not possess ecclesiastical inviolability of conscience, but one of the three formularies protects your interests as a state servant as well. Just the same, my formulary protects mine," Haakon delivered a personal lecture to Virgilia. And concluded: "So don't go playing the victim."

"I've never liked you churchmen for your evasiveness. Parasites I understand, that's clear. But how cunning you are. You'll always turn any remark inside out."

Jinngo guffawed; Virgilia kicked him under the table.

"And why's that we're parasites, mistress?!" Haakon boiled over. "We demand money from no one! The Formulary on the Freedom of Meanings, the second of the Three, clearly states: 'Churches are not subject to the authorities, and, conversely, authorities ought not serve as a prop for churches.' And our benefit is enormous: who else but us will tell a person what it's all for, anyway. How then to live? And we're modest: no one is permitted… how do your pettifoggers say it… to usurp the truth. As many churches as people want, that many there shall be."

Virgilia felt a spark of excitement.

"You're wrong, old man. Precisely because I know firmly 'my,' as you say, formulary. The one about power. We even sang it in school to remember it easier," she objected and sang: "'Where ridges part the waters left and right, there stands the customs house—sole toll for power's might. Sole. Power may be a beast, while yet The Code of Three Formularies is not breached. Free are folk to depart to another rule. Only for a crack in The Code is punishment schooled.'"

"Well?" the old man listened to the singing doubtfully.

The other three were occupied with eating. The great events seemed to have passed through them like wind through a shutter crack.

"Just recently you lamented, saying, there were three great churches, now two..."

"I remember perfectly the smell of bread on the day everything changed," said the old man.

"And that too is normal. Before you know it, you'll remember another such smell. In a jar of spiders, in the end, only one remains—the fattest. Is that good, in your opinion?"

"It is bad, mistress," Haakon answered in the language of authenticity.

"In secular life, it's the same. A large manufactory devours a small one, and so on until only one remains. It's natural."

"But there is no such thing!"

"Correct. And why is that? For power has no right to interfere, to punish for that which is not a crime against The Code. The consolidation of an enterprise is evidently not such an act."

"If it happened in some country that only one enterprise remained, like a huge spider over the whole land, then people would leave that country and go to neighboring ones. No one can detain a person at a watershed. Only goods, or a dispatch if it pertains to goods."

"And what then? Would the spider-enterprise go bankrupt? Why would it? Fewer people, true, but it remains irreplaceable. The spider would grow leaner, but wouldn't go anywhere. Or should it wait until absolutely everyone leaves the country? Have you heard of a country from which everyone left?"

"Well, I don't know, mistress... such a thing has never happened," the old man mumbled, "for someone alone... to seize the entire flow of goods... even in some

part. So that tomatoes, say, belonged to only one merchant, and that's all. Such a thing has never happened."

"Precisely! Never. And why?"

"Why's that?" the old man blinked.

"Because before such a thing could occur, the weather, or even the climate, would change in the 'right' place. The flow of goods would shift, and the enterprise along with it."

"In the right place for whom?" the old man didn't understand.

"For Avertigus! Who else," Virgilia enunciated. "The Code of Formularies was sent down to us all from somewhere above, from the sky, from the depths of history, through the stone authority of the First Ones, but in truth Avertigus steers on the sly. We have no will, if one looks soberly at things, understand? None!"

"But how can that be?! Does not the Third Formulary say: 'In the public field, the word must be naked, revealing thoughts, not twisting the soul for a moment. Deals are sealed strictly, and trade is conducted with the license of power. Cooperating, the merchanter's commercial lies twist reality for the good, for supply and demand are his science. But the private whisper of informal address and the word in solitude belong only to you—no one shall violate personal will.'"

"Violate it they will," Jinngo interjected. "The will of a clan, for instance, will violate your personal will for less than a pinch of snuff. And the clan's prosperity can also be adjusted by climate, wherever and whenever Avertigus sees fit. And so we live: without hope, in desire."

"But you yourself said that you would leave your clan!" Haakon exclaimed. "And no one can stop you."

"Yes, evil is not absolute. But time is like viscosity. There always hangs such a, you know, safe threat. It wearies. It turns out I am not one who acts, but one who is forced to wait. I know of people—opticians like me—who wanted and could study the properties of sparklettes, who thirsted to subject new forces and waves to people. They were wearied with promises, with waiting, with refusals."

"You mean they didn't cough up coin for research?" Haakon clarified.

"Aye."

"Perhaps that is the reason? They were covetous, I wager, your distant acquaintances?"

"I allow it. But not all. How many centuries old is the world? No one even knows anymore. In the archives are many works of the Forebears—think, take, and do. Yet no one has ever done anything."

"Perhaps it's not needed?" Haakon reasoned.

"Perhaps not; on that you're right," said Virgilia. "We don't presume to decide who needs what, what is useful for whom. And what 'useful' even is—we don't know. Our claim is simpler and more delicate: each must follow their own rules."

"Yet you reproach Avertigus—whereas for him there are no rules."

"And that is precisely what the judge will verify," Virgilia said cheerfully. "Isn't that right, Ratu?"

"Right."

⁂

From the morning, the charron was occupied with the labor of a stonecutter. Prithrea's refuge had to be kept secret. This underground space had not been dug. Prithrea had related that the hill upon which the city stands is, to a significant degree, the earth she removed from the diversion channels of the tunnels she dug. Volmelftstein grew up over the mill, not the other way around. Although a bridge led to the tower, it was not used due to superstition. Every resident of the city knew this, including the charron, who had moved here not so long ago. How Prithrea managed to give the Seventh Gate its ill repute, she did not tell. Though the gate might have acquired such an attitude toward itself on its own. In any case, Prithrea had managed to enter the underground unnoticed. What could have happened to accidental witnesses, one preferred not to think.

Aris's current goal was to cut a passage in the rock to the spot above which stood the inner wall of the Seventh Tower. Further, he planned to carve an opening in the wall itself—quite a thick one—at the height of a man above ground level. There was a spot there where a bench stood in a niche. If he could fashion a crawlway so as to emerge above the bench, it would be possible to enter the city unnoticed. One moment the bench is empty, the next—a weary townsman sits upon it.

The god's hair cut stone effortlessly, but that solved only part of the task. Firstly, the rapier could not be plunged with the cleaving hair directly deep into the rock—the mounting hindered it. One had to shave stone chips from the edges. Secondly, the resulting debris had to be hauled away. The deeper he went into the tunnel, the wearier he grew, and the more he neglected clearing the path be-

hind him. His professional sense of distance told him he was almost at his goal. The charron became engrossed. At some point, he realized he had buried himself. He did not panic. He looked around. Along the stone walls ran wide cracks, inhabited by lichen and minute fungi. He sat down to rest—there is no fate that cannot be overcome by contempt for it. The only hindrance was the absence of an immediate decision: to cut forward to the end, or to dig himself out backward, filling in what had already been freed of stone? It suddenly seemed to him that he had found freedom in understanding the absurdity of his own situation and had achieved a state of serene acceptance.

Thereupon he lost consciousness.

"There lived an old man and an old woman; they had a little bird, it laid an egg in a corner under the window: keen, cunning, gold! She placed it on a shelf; a mouse ran by, wagged its tail, the shelf fell, the egg broke. The old man weeps, the old woman wails, the stove blazes, the top of the hut sways, the granddaughter girl hanged herself from grief. When the communion-bread baker heard—she broke all the communion breads and threw them away."

He opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was an oinochoe. That seemed the right word. A vessel from antiquity. That seemed the right word as well. Shifting his gaze aside, Aris's eyes met a portion of a fresco, a couple of feet away. A wall. In the image, someone was ascending on high. Into the sky, apparently. In the sky was a moon. The melodic troparion, meanwhile, continued, but now at a new, nervous tempo:

"Let us behold by the unapproachable light of resurrection… an unpublished homily of Chrysostom… light-bearing procession… from the tomb chambers… fill with joy… all-festive and salvific is this night… timeless light… his bone, let it not be broken… purgatorial—again from the tomb white truth dawned for us the Moon…"

Aris realized he was singing it himself. He saw his own hands, which were folding some resilient hide in the shape of a man with precise and reverent movements. With effort, he managed to turn his head slightly and look around. His head immediately, of its own accord, wobbled and returned to its former position. But Aris had time to see that he was in a cell. The little window was vertical, about three shoulders wide, no more. The light from it was for some reason red and dancing. Why, it's a fire! "We're burning. I'm burning." Now additional evidence of this fact began to arrive: from outside, beyond the door, from the corridor came the sound of disorderly tramping. Exclamations.

Aris suddenly was able to connect the troparion he himself was uttering with the costume being folded. He—was a sindonologist! Now he began to hear not his own voice, but "his" thoughts. "Not without God's providence…"; "meekly to announce the good tidings of death…"; "the bush that does not burn…". Aris understood that the costume was an object of liturgical veneration. Perhaps—and of a great hymnographic tradition. "Let us purify our senses and purify…"—he darted out of the cell with the folded costume in a large bag. The hump on his chest was gone. In the common hall, several monks were clumsily trying to splash water upward onto the burning ceiling. What mundane foolishness, he thought. The smoke made itself felt—he coughed with his new chest. Corridor, stairs, hall; and there they were outside.

In the low, low clouds, the shadow of a pale wyrm flickered. What new calamity, he thought. But it was a wyrm, he could swear it. Filthy-filthy-green. And pale. Against the blue-gray clouds. No doubt whatsoever. And then it thundered. Aris had experienced an acoustic shock of such force only once before. In early youth, at military training. Thus, in fear and indignation, he tumbled out of the events.

*

"Well, you're something, brother!" Jinngo loomed over the charron. "Why'd you bury yourself? We barely dug you out."

Everyone was here. All covered in stone dust. Haakon's hands were bleeding. The questant, meanwhile, was inspecting the tunnel walls.

"Apparently, the fungi exude a stupor," Virgilia concluded. She was pleased with herself. She smiled at the charron: "Well? To the mill, or will you work some more?"

Aris asked:

"Do you, by any chance, know the meaning of the ancient tale about the golden egg?"

Virgilia rolled her eyes:

"No, now I see: to the mill, definitely!"

"I know," said the judge. "The golden egg iss a densse knot of an extant insstrument, lodged among a sheaf of proper toolss. Ssuch an instrument neither enterss circulation itself, nor does it infect everything around it with itss own non-integratability. The egg iss a fetish of sacredness; one ought not overestimate

the equilibrium and conditionality of the world. In the universal chain, there iss alwayss a weak link..."

With the word "betimes!" Haakon the Good cut off the judge and nudged everyone toward the exit.

¶

Fragment 29. The Solid Corpus of Prithrea's Solid Corpse

¶

That same night they finished the passage and sent the judge home. She, in accordance with their plan, had business in the city. And besides, she simply needed to go home. The priest departed with her.

The charron remained underground for another day to assist the optician, who was preparing the transparent alloy according to Prithrea's formula. She had possessed the knowledge and the materials, but she had lacked the optician's craftsmanship. Her blanks could not compare in the slightest to what Jinngo produced. A day later, Virgilia, Jinngo, and Aris, having gathered a considerable quantity of certain items, also slipped out from beneath the Seventh Tower in the dead of night and made their way to the charron's dwelling.

Several days passed in routine matters. The charron received payment for his commission. The majordomo's denunciation had not reached the competent authorities due to the flood, and the client, having received what he desired, did not bother with the details. Jinngo, for the time being, preferred not to seek contact with his relatives. Haakon visited a couple of times. He slept in one of the guest cells of the Order. The judge sent word via a courier that she was ready. They had already gone several times to the Rathaus to examine the constantly growing lists of the dead—it was important for Virgilia to know if anyone from her circle had survived. Now, the three of them were pacing from one list to the next, lists posted on wooden boards in the central square. On the whole, the city was in a state of upheaval—the aftermath of the flood was compounded by a surge of mercantile activity. Trading wharves and riverside warehouses were being erected with urgent haste. The burgomaster's Chancellery was being literally stormed by those wishing to purchase parcels of land near the city moat.

"Why do so many of the deceased have descriptions but no names?" the charron asked Virgilia, studying yet another list.

"They're NPCs," she answered curtly.

"Who are they?"

"Non-Papered Citizens. People registered nowhere. That's what we call them in gendarme jargon."

"Why are there so many of them?"

"There are always many. The town was known for its loose morals, after all. And among the dead, even more so. Many people intuitively shut their windows, doors, and stove flues tight, which saved their lives—the gas didn't displace all the air. But NPCs are mostly homeless."

"Are they foreigners?"

"Most are. But there are criminals among them too, and simply idle folk. Vagabonds. There's little profit in registration."

"What profits are there?"

"Hm… Offhand, I can't say. Ah, here's one: you can't participate in legal proceedings if you're an NPC. In any capacity. You must have been on the formal rolls for a full day's cycle at the time of filing."

"You don't say!" Aris exclaimed. "I need to see the judge immediately."

Virgilia and Jinngo exchanged glances and shrugged. If he had wanted to say why, he would have said so.

"The optician and I will be at home."

⁂

Judge Aethelaid Ratu was pacing her office in the Palace of Justice with furious strides.

"You're an idiot, Ariss. A complete one!"

"I admit—it wasn't in Prithrea's behest. But she said: 'Go to the grotto; it will help you.' Or something to that effect."

Ratu sat down, attempting to compose herself. She planted her elbows on the desk and rested her chin in her hands—her head bobbed like that of a child's doll. Finally, she named her price:

"My voice is second only to yours. Mine. Not Virgilia's."

"Ohk."

The judge extended her hand to seal the agreement:

"The day after tomorrow, at noon."

⁂

The next day, in the morning city news-sheet, under the section of legal notices in the standard ruling grid, appeared the following: "Tomorrow, on the final day of the sennight, at noon, in the Palace of Justice, a hearing is scheduled for Docket No. 105192 (Code: The Prithrea Case). Present: Plaintiff, Witness No. 1, Witness No. 2. Judge: Ratu."

"Two witnesses," Virgilia irritably tossed the sheet onto the table and rounded on the optician Jinngo with a question: "Did you know?"

"Well..." he began to hedge, "I suspected. I'm a witness too."

She suddenly stepped up and gave him a genuine cuff on the back of the head. Jinngo chose not to protest.

"Well, you're completely unhinged," she said to the charron. "Good luck to you tomorrow. I'm going for a walk."

⁂

The avenue leading to the colonnade of the Palace of Justice had been cordoned off since early morning, once the city watch realized that otherwise, disorder would be unavoidable. Half an hour before noon, a figure appeared at the far end of the avenue. This figure was hideous—his chest jutted forward in a dreadful keel. He carried an open palanquin. Upon the palanquin stood a strange throne, covered in green fur resembling moss. Upon the throne sat a person who was none other than the First Chancellor, whose gigantic visage had been carved into the cliff face many centuries ago.

The people crowding thirty or forty paces beyond the cordon divided into two camps. The disagreement arose because the man carried the palanquin alone, whereas in all similar cases, four are used. In this instance, it seemed sufficient for the man to hold the handle of the imposing lectica in his left hand, walking ahead and to the right of the palanquin, swinging his straight right arm with each stride. One faction believed the man possessed enough strength in the grip of his left hand to hold such a massive object horizontally by a single handle. The other faction believed it was the passenger of the lectica who was the cause of its strange behavior. The first group argued their view on the grounds that the palanquin swayed slightly as it moved. Were the cause the one seated upon the throne, that would be impossible.

Be that as it may, the man and the palanquin, having traversed the entire avenue at a slow pace, soon successfully transferred themselves into the interior of the

Palace of Justice. And the reason was a banal handcart made of not-so-banal transparent steel, placed underneath the palanquin from below.

⁂

"All rise. Court is now in session."

Ratu herself, eschewing the Secretary for the sake of gravity, rapped her gavel and announced in her distinctive, sibilant lisp: "The hearing of the Court in the 'Prithrea Cayss' iss declared open. The Plaintiff will pleasse sstate the nature of the claim."

"The inertia of Coriole ceased its function. I, Aris, hold Avertigus to be the prime cause of this phenomenon and accuse Avertigus of the negative consequences thereof."

"Pressent the witnesss for the prosssecution," ordered the judge.

"I, Jinngo, bear witness, Your Honor."

"Ssecretary, verify the witnesss," demanded the judge.

"Verified, Your Honor. It is Jinngo."

"Witnesss regisstration?"

"Valid."

"Ssubmit expert tesstimony."

"Coriole is the prime cause of cyclones, which, in turn, is wind, which, in turn, makes seafaring possible, without which trade is impossible. Trade is a system-forming factor within the Code of Three Inviolable Formularies. He who caused the impossibility of fulfilling the Code is a criminal."

"Sstate the defensse'ss objectionss," demanded the judge.

"The interruption of Coriole was short-lived and could not have influenced cyclone formation."

"Overruled due to the immateriality of the parameter and the fundamental nature of the quesstion," the judge decreed. "Pressent the witnesss for the defensse."

"Witness for the defense: the First Chancellor," announced the Secretary.

"Verification."

"It is the First Chancellor, Your Honor."

"Ssubmit medical certificsation."

"This man is alive, Your Honor."

"Does he ssleep?" asked the judge.

"No, Your Honor. His condition is not sleep."

"Witnesss regisstration?"

"Valid."

"I rule: refusal to tesstify. Sstate the ssubstance of the ssecond grievance."

"Prithrea has perished."

"Death certificsate?"

"Valid, Your Honor."

"Sstate the plaintiff'ss demandss," said the judge.

"To compel Avertigus to construct, in place of the old, a new world devoid of the defects specified in the claim."

"The Court will now retire for deliberation," announced the Secretary.

⁂

"All rise! Court is in session. Hear the verdicts of the Court!" announced the Secretary.

Ratu stood, her voice cutting through the chamber with the full weight of her affliction, each word a hammer-blow of finality: "Read from the Verdictss: Avertigus iss found guilty on the firsst charge. Avertigus iss not found guilty on the ssecond charge. Avertigus iss compelled to execute the plaintiff'ss demand. Thesse proceedingss are concluded. The solid corpuss of Prithrea iss adjudicated," announced the Secretary.

"The solid corpse of Prithrea..." repeated a whisper in the hall.

"The solid corpse of Prithrea," repeated a whisper in the corridors of the building.

"The Solid Body of Prithrea," roared the crowd in the street.

⁂

As the man and the palanquin made their return journey along the avenue, a few changes had occurred compared to the morning's atmosphere.

Firstly, the faction that attributed the unusual mode of transport to the strength of the man with the humped chest had grown. Whether the second faction had grown remained unknown, as the total number of people in the crowd had multiplied several times over. Everything depended on an unknowable distribution.

Secondly, cries of "The Solid Body of Prithrea" could be heard everywhere. This had not been the case in the morning.

Thirdly, because several dozen onlookers had clambered into an old linden tree for a better view, the unfortunate tree had given way. A trunk two arm-spans thick lay across the avenue, and it had not yet been cleared away.

The man with the palanquin did not tarry on account of this circumstance. Rather than attempt to go around, he drew from his spine a thin, long rapier, flicked its tip with the toe of his boot, and then, with two drawing cuts, divided the trunk into three pieces as though it were made of butter. With a shove of the same boot, he sent the resulting block rolling forward. This permitted him and the palanquin to proceed along the trajectory the hunchfronted man had charted for himself.

When the man reached the end of the avenue, he politely requested that the representatives of the crowd not follow him. His request was immediately satisfied, perhaps even ahead of schedule. He continued alone in the direction of the Seventh Tower.

"That's an unwholesome place, everyone knows that," thought, in all likelihood, each of the prudent citizens present, justifying to themselves their decision to depart for home forthwith.

¶

Fragment 30. The Faith of Mutual Breath

¶

It was warm inside. It was cold outside. The charron watched with irritation as frost built up on both sides of the gap beneath the ill-fitting, crooked door. The chill air seeped over his feet in their winter boots. The trash frozen into the earthen floor could not possibly be swept away until the spring thaw arrived. It was dispiriting.

"That's it, no more oil," said Haakon, shaking the last drops from the bottle into a bowl of rice. "Wouldn't a skilled charron be wanted across the border, esteemed Aris? Why are we starving to death here?"

"In the judiccial line, and indeed any legal line, we've all been blacklissted for good. I checked through contactss in Marisstea," said Ratu. "Charron archerss fall under the ssame heading. You yoursself, Haakon, were the firsst to sslip up—you've been ssitting here all day long ssince the flood itsself. And I'll remind you, the flood wass at ssummer's end. Ariss and I at leasst haul cargo at the dockss when the chance arisess."

"The Order is one across all lands, as you well know," Haakon defended himself. "Once they brand you in one place, it's game over everywhere. And at the docks they'd finish me off for that heresy about the surfaced barter-devices. With a cobbler's awl or a hatchet."

"Ass if they offer me tea everywhere for that ill-fated verdict," the judge continued grumbling.

There was a cautious knock on the door from outside. Some of the frost on the cracks fell away.

"It is Card-Panso, former majordomo of House Jinngo," came a voice from the cold. "I've come at the behest of Chancellor Optic Jinngo and his wife, Virgilia, pursuing, in particular, a personal objective..."

The charron flung open the door and yanked Card-Panso inside.

"Look me in the eye, you vile informer, and speak plain as man to man—what the hell are you doing here? Come to gloat over the outcast?"

"'Plain' it is," Card-Panso looked neither dispirited nor, on the contrary, spirited. He carried a large basket of food. "I'm in the same boat, Master Aris. No one will hire me. No one will lend me money. I'd even say they won't let me leave the country, if I weren't afraid of extrajudicial persecution for 'unsubstantiated slander.' They're practically mocking me."

"You shouldn't have written those denunciations."

"And why on earth should I not have informed, when that was my job?" Card-Panso remarked reasonably. "But never mind, that's ancient history. The reason I've come… May I sit down now? I've brought wine."

The charron gestured him to a chair. Card-Panso shrugged off his sheepskin coat, removed his hat, looked around for a place to put them, and, finding no better option, propped them against the wall.

"In essence, what happened was… I went to him to confess my faults… And the opulence in the palace, let me tell you! I've served in more than one wealyour clan, and more than two… I've never seen such lavish splendor anywhere. There's just a conflict with elegance there…"

"And I always told our adepts in the Order," Haakon interjected, "that we had the misfortune to serve in a non-monarchy. Nowhere but long-suffering Illumiros would such a calamity have befallen us. A Chancellor, for crying out loud. Had there been a monarch in the land, some half-baked optician wouldn't have wormed his way in through such an awkward turn of events…" Haakon was warming up. "You're the one who fostered him with your antics, Aris. Who would he be if you hadn't backed him after that trial… You didn't just back him, you practically elevated him. A real prince. Ashamed of his own ugliness, were you?"

"Shut up, Haakon, will you?" the charron cut him off without malice. "I've heard this from you seven hundred times. Card-Panso, kindly stick to the point yourself."

Card-Panso poured wine for everyone, but the judge declined.

"Right, so. I went to beg his forgiveness, seeing as I'd like to eat. Last sennight I ate nothing but…"

"To the point," Aris requested again.

"He says, 'your sin is not so great—do as I say, carry out an errand, and I'll forgive you.' In short, he tasked me with inviting you—well, all of you—to a meeting."

"It's a trap," the former priest said at once. "No doubt about it. In public, his nerve failed him when it came to seizing you, Aris. But like this, he can claim later that you came begging for money and attacked him in a fit of rage. Who's going to question the palace guard these days?"

The charron stood and paced the small room.

"He knows I won't come at his invitation," he said. "He's an oathbreaker. Why is he wasting his breath?"

"The tragedy between you is not one of disagreement, but of kinship, dear Aris," said Card-Panso. "He hates you because you're the only one who can see how soiled his hands become. Only you understand what is filth and what is not. His enemies are blind to what matters to him."

"I don't think he's prepared to burn the world down to keep it warm," Aris replied. "The thing is, his newspapers are full of grand pronouncements about the ages to come, whereas I am concerned with which person will be eating the last potato out of my mouth tomorrow morning."

"You speak of difficult matters, Master Aris. I'm only good for… carrying on a conversation using simple worldly wisdom. Don't expect a worthy interlocutor in me. And, you know… may I just drink some wine with you all, and you just agree to come? That's all, and we shake on it? My head is spinning, I've no idea why."

"The wine doesn't seem fortified," Haakon noted.

Ratu watched the proceedings with undisguised skepticism.

"Vertigo, you say?" the charron inquired with keen interest. "Without any apparent cause? How many times have I told you blockheads," he addressed his companions, "one must await the day that matters for each of us!"

Aris rose from his chair, pulled Card-Panso up as well, and led him to a relatively clear spot on the floor free of objects.

"Do this," he instructed the former majordomo. "Distinctly pronounce five times, turning to face the direction of each of the five Great Rivers: 'I am. All that is not mine by right of free choice returns to oblivion.' Go on! Prithrea called it 'seizing one's own day.'"

Card-Panso shrugged and did as instructed. Not difficult for an unconfrontational man.

"Now spin around and swear a blue streak!"

"What ssort of wine are you drinking, you loutss?" the judge grew worried.

Aris held her back by the shoulders with both hands, addressing Card-Panso.

"Curse! Swear! Rain down invective on everyone and everything!" Aris demanded.

Gradually, under the charron's pressure, the former majordomo gave in. And then he got into it—his former profession had furnished him with an unimaginable vocabulary in the required field. It was hard to conceive how many stablehands, scullery maids, and washerwomen had been subjected to his foul tongue in their day. At first it seemed amusing, but the comedic element somehow imperceptibly evaporated. Worse yet: the hilarity vanished not of its own accord, but under the pressure of a quite tangible little breeze. At any rate, everyone present soon found the situation no longer a laughing matter. The charron tried to stop the unruly majordomo, but it was no use. His inertial mass was twice as great. Haakon saved the day: he dashed outside with a wash bucket, scooped up snow, and dumped it on the dancing blasphemer.

Card-Panso came to his senses. He was bewilderedly picking potato peels off his face—the snow on the city street had not been entirely clean.

"Back with us?" the charron asked.

"Well, you really outdid yourself, Master," Card-Panso said at last.

"More like you outdid yourself," the charron reminded him.

Everyone studied the big man's visibly refreshed face with interest.

"Report!" Aris ordered. "What are you filled with?"

"I had a vision, Master, that I had not seen the world before. Only a map. And it was obscuring it."

"Obscuring what?"

"I don't know. The world itself… I don't know another word for it. As if it only opens up when you stop using it."

"What are you talking about? How can one use the world?"

"Well… by living in it. In short, I felt a generosity, Master. That's the right word. The world shone with newness."

The charron began thoughtfully sweeping the remnants of snow and peels into a dustpan. When he finished, he said:

"Tell him: in thirteen days. My condition is that the meeting will take place at the mill. He knows where."

"Very well, Master."

"Are you with me?" Aris asked, looking intently at Card-Panso.

"For better or for grave, Master!" The serene expression on the majordomo's huge face was comical. Though now without any dubious or dark subtext.

"It's not for free. You now bear the responsibility for the decision that we will walk into Optic Jinngo's clutches. We'll meet the day after tomorrow, an hour before dawn." Aris marked a point on the map hanging on the wall with a thin stylus. "We have business to attend to."

⁂

The judge was seized in a similar fashion the following morning. Everything passed more calmly, of course—both on account of her temperament and the presence of prior experience. Ratu did not share her sensations. She merely informed them that an unusual experience had, without question, taken place. Yet her brief remark sufficed, in turn, to cast Aris and Haakon into an unusual state.

"Do you hear yourself, Ratu?" the charron asked carefully.

"For now, yes," she replied. "What's the case, exactly?"

"The case is in the 'caiss,' you foolish old crone," Haakon rewarded the judge with a familiar slap on the shoulder. He broke into a grin.

"Our colleague means to say," Aris hastened to soothe the bewildered judge, "that your difficulties with the pronunciation of certain sounds are behind you."

Instead of rejoicing, the judge frowned.

"But you said that for Prithrea it only worked as a protection against aging."

"I said no such thing. She merely said that on 'her' day, which recurs every five hundred minus thirteen days, one must refuse. I asked how to refuse. She said exactly the words with which I instructed Card-Panso yesterday, and you today. That's all."

"Why not 'four hundred eighty-seven,' like normal people say?"

"I have no idea."

The judge waved her hand in a manner suggesting it was all tolerable and even good.

"It wouldn't be reckless to celebrate this with a trip to the bagnio. That's my opinion," she said. "Come with me, Master. Let Haakon get a proper wash here too, taking advantage of the solitude."

"You're not taking me? You're shunning me," the old man whined.

"You're afraid to go outside yourself. And I've told you more than once, that heresy of yours..."

"It's not mine!"

"...that heresy has long been scrubbed from all the barter-devices."

"I'll stay home for now," Haakon still preferred to be cautious.

⁂

The road to the nearest bagnio led through the city center—they had to jostle through the narrow streets.

"Mutual breath... the faith," a passerby suddenly whispered, extending a large coin to the charron. On his doublet was a tiny patch, about the size of the smallest coin, depicting five colored circles arranged like an arrowhead. The arrow pointed upward. Had this man not pressed close to pass the coin without drawing attention to the fact, the judge and Aris would never have noticed the unusual mark.

The charron declined the alms. With a gesture. The judge, however, gave him a sharp poke in the ribs and smiled politely at the giver. The charron took the money and expressed gratitude with a formal gesture.

After that, armed with the knowledge that such marks existed, the charron's attention worked differently, and he noticed them repeatedly on the clothing of people passing by.

Otherwise, they reached their destination without incident.

It is said that the bagnio across the continent of Pentareach were built back in the time of the First Rulers. The charron believed this version of events. He doubted that anyone could erect such a structure in the present age. An enormous tub of characteristic shape: a set of wide cylinders nested within one another, growing narrower the deeper one went underwater. The water heated itself, from beneath the earth. Even now, in winter, it was comfortable to sit in the

open-air tub. Below, under the basin, where one could descend, were numerous waterfalls. The water was flowing, supplied by underground pressure. There were no pumps in the bagnio. Rumors circulated that there had once been icehouses near the basins, but they operated on mechanisms that had long since crumbled. How they worked, no one knew. No surprise they were destroyed. An icehouse is a source of income. One can store goods. They must have quarreled over them and broken them. But why, if it was known they somehow functioned, did no one have the persistence to find out how?

The charron's thoughts, however, quickly shifted to the fear that the price had been hiked again. But no: according to the parchment at the entrance, for a half-teller coin the castellan was to issue them four sheets, two bars of soap, and basins with handles, and the gatekeeper was to admit them to the premises with a warning that he would find them and throw them out in an hour if they didn't leave on their own. And again, no: they were let in for free. The man at the entrance did so with caution, glancing around to see if any superiors, guards, or worse were nearby. But he let them in. Undoubtedly, their reputation among the common folk had grown lately. The reasons for this were unclear to the charron. But Optic Jinngo's unexpected desire to meet… it was clearly connected to this fact—so the charron reasoned.

"I see you're still deeply troubled by the summer events?" Ratu asked once they had seated themselves on the inner steps of the pool.

Aris had visibly grown emotional, and this did not escape the judge's notice, despite the fog over the water, which was quite dense due to the cold weather.

"Terribly troubled," the charron admitted.

"Don't let it weigh on you, young man. It always happens this way. The tragedy of architects and the triumph of opportunists. Someone devises, organizes, and it becomes fuel for random people."

"I had no intention of seizing power."

The old woman shook her head in annoyance.

"Try explaining to anyone that you overthrew the authority of all state institutions just for the sake of walking away from the ruins empty-handed. No one will believe it. I know that's how it was. But no one else has the same reasons I do to follow you."

Aris remained lost in thought, not absorbing the essence of the judge's consolations.

"Virgilia made her decision the moment she learned of the second witness," he said.

"And I'll tell you again: that was to be expected. Were I younger, I too would have rallied the corps of questants and querists under my banner. They are the most intelligent people among those who can act with will, weapon, and cunning. Their chancellorship, with her husband, will transition into a hereditary monarchy, make no mistake. Jinngo is a gallant figurehead of power and a husband, but not for long. Virgilia understands that."

The charron lightly slapped the water with his palm.

"I can't see you for the steam, Ratu. Shall we move to the next basin? The air is clearer there."

"Let's stay. By the time the water reaches the farthest tubs, it's already cold. Like power… It cools by the time it reaches the watershed."

"You're right, but we're talking about different things. Of course, history makes use of the dreamer Optic Jinngo; history also gives the stage to Virgilia behind his back. But Virgilia is no fraud. Not even a grasper. Her ambitions are of a different sort. They are very fluid. You know, rumors say she has sent spies in all directions—to search for and register mastless yachts? That's precisely why the rumor leaked from the palace walls—such an odd action."

"Does she want to find Prithrea?" the judge asked.

"I don't even know if I want to search for her myself. To find her—yes. But to search? I don't know… And she was cooling, you know… Her body was not like that of the First Rulers. I'm almost certain she is dead. I am inclined to wait, although I still haven't managed to catch my own day by the tail, as you did this morning. It seems to me that Avertigus simply hasn't heard your verdict yet. Or rather, he has heard it, but the thought of it hasn't yet passed through his consciousness. And Virgilia is eager to act."

In the judge's hand was a curved metal scraper coated with oil. She was slowly running it over her forearm.

"How does one act in such circumstances?" the judge inquired. "Shout at the heavens: 'Hey up there! Read the verdict. Immediately'?"

"Virgilia, for instance, wants to shift the distribution of the Cylinder's moments of inertia. Then Avertigus will notice."

Ratu ducked her head underwater to properly appreciate the intention.

"Let me think," she said, surfacing. "She wants to orchestrate a mass migration of peoples up the mountain? The relocation of human bodies, their dams, their tools—that is the only action of that kind available to her in principle."

"Yes. I tried to explain to her that the final effect cannot be calculated: the character of the water runoff into the Rivers will change. Due to irrigation at a different altitude, the rivers will be slightly different. The size of the fruit will be different. Very, very complicated."

"In a way, she's right. Calculation isn't necessary if your intention is merely to make noise and wake Avertigus. I think her behavioral model is simple: she shakes and rattles everything, starting with what is most loosely fastened. The Church is her first target. Or rather, all churches. We're already seeing it. That passerby, what was he whispering?"

"Some new faith?"

The steam hung thick, almost palpable, like a fabric draped over one's shoulders.

"I'll tell you more, young man. She enjoys doing this without a backward glance at some Avertigus and his lapses in managing the physics of the world. I even think she doesn't believe he intervenes in our lives."

"But you believe?" Aris grew anxious.

"After this morning—yes. Before that, my evidence consisted only of words. Not just yours, good Aris. I've lived a long life and met very, very interesting people. But still, only words."

"And Coriole? And the flood?"

Heat rose from beneath the flagstones, from hidden channels.

"Coriole is just words. I've seen far more elaborate mystifications. The flood breaks no rules and proves nothing."

"Ah, you hypocritical old crone," the charron smiled.

"But inner experience," the judge continued, "is a convincing thing, I won't dissemble. I can see you've concocted something grandiose again. I'll support you."

When the time came, clean and cleansed, they set off for home. With the money saved, a meal that was decent by their current standards awaited them.

¶

Fragment 31. The Seventh Tower

¶

Sitting by the campfire, the charron busied himself turning over the large smooth stones lying in the flames. He waited until they were hot, then dragged them aside with a gnarled branch and laid fresh ones in their place. Card-Panso merely cooked a fish chowder from three large crucian carp he had just pulled from the moat encircling the city wall. He'd had to break a hole in the ice and bend the law a little—a law that was itself not wholly lawful. As soon as it grew light, they doused the flames. The stones went on warming the small clearing for them.

From here, both the Sixth and the Seventh Towers were equally visible. On the walls of the Sixth hung two enormous all-weather tapestries, stretched severely in the vertical. One bore a portrait of the optician Jinngo. The second, Virgilia. Not far from the tower bustled a quay, crowded with people and goods—a thing that had not existed here six months ago. As dawn broke over the Seventh, men in the tired uniforms of municipal services began to converge. Judging by their movements, they were surveyors and representatives from the architectural bureau.

The charron had intended to wait for some sign of impatience from the former majordomo, to gauge his disposition and the drift of his thoughts. So he dawdled openly. It didn't work. Card-Panso was absorbed in the fish chowder and wholly satisfied with reality.

"We need to steal something from the Seventh Tower," the charron said, nodding toward the structure.

"What size and weight?" Card-Panso asked instantly.

"That is a remarkably precise and pertinent question, Card-Panso. You've pleased me from the first minutes of our collaboration. It will be a carriage. Standard size—for a team of four. Not empty. But not heavy either. Not gold. Plan for the weight of three men, counting the two of us. Plus the carriage itself."

"Where is the tower's exit? Can we see it from here?"

'Right to the point again,' the charron thought, though he didn't voice it immediately. Technically, bringing an accomplice here was pointless. They couldn't get inside for reconnaissance now. They couldn't even get close—there were guards. With this little excursion into nature, the charron was performing a prosaic ritual of synchronization, so they would both see the same thing and their internal models would align. To be entirely honest, Aris was offloading a portion of responsibility, making the Tower itself a witness to the conspiracy. Frankly and without guile, he answered:

"We aren't here to see the building. We're here to show ourselves to the Seventh Tower. And the carriage won't emerge from the tower at all, but from underwater. It will surface in the moat."

"So there won't be any draft animal with it?" Card-Panso deduced sensibly. "I take it that's my part?"

"You understand perfectly," the charron nodded.

With eagerness and skill, the former majordomo took up Aris's banner of external contemplation as an ontological necessity. He sat and simply was. Not only did he not hurry or fret, but the very space around him actively devoured all agitation. Every caw of a crow—and there were many cawing in the high branches of the pines—Aris now heard as distinct, both in voice and in the bird's phrase. Generalization failed. Card-Panso had to come into the charron's life for him to suddenly grasp that difference is not a property of the world. It is a property of attention.

"Let me add some situational parameters," Aris said. "We'll likely be shot at. The carriage is bulletproof. But the driver's box, naturally, is just a driver's box. An open bench."

Card-Panso pondered for a long while. Then again, he might simply have been silent.

"It will take a fair bit of money," his practical outlook anchored the intent to material concerns.

"Here," the charron said, readily handing over a paper. "This isn't money. It's a charter that authorizes you to collect donations on my behalf. I didn't make it into government, not close to the money, but I have a feeling that even this will work."

"It will work," Card-Panso agreed. "Once, that is. They'll hang us for a second try. But since we're aiming to get into that carriage for good, the situation's tolerable.

And don't fret about government—the lawsuit was worth it. Though I, for one, certainly wouldn't have gone in for such a gamble."

'It really was a good idea to come out here,' the charron thought, grateful to the majordomo for the support. 'A plan discussed in a room remains an abstraction. A plan discussed in plain view of the place where you might well lose your life becomes an event.'

"One more thing," the charron said. "It might not stop at pistol and musket fire."

He pointed to a cannon mounted on the wall adjoining the Sixth Tower.

"Aye, I took note of her, Master Aris," Card-Panso smiled. "Well then, fare ye well! Until the appointed hour. I'll pick you up on the surface of the water."

And he departed in the direction of the Sixth Tower. About ten paces away, he turned with an even broader grin:

"There's no such thing as a bulletproof carriage, Master!"

The charron waited until he was gone; drew the rapier from his spine and a bladder from his pocket; undressed; tied a pair of stones to his feet; heaved a bitter sigh with thoughts of "mutual breath"; pulled the bladder over his head; took the rapier in hand, and climbed into the ice hole from which they had lately pulled three crucian carp.

⁂

On the morning of the appointed day, the charron turned Prithrea's rapier this way and that, trying to satisfy his curiosity. "Curiosity is the only thing that merely fattens and demands more the more you satisfy it," he muttered, as if that might help him understand something.

"Tell me, good Haakon, do any of you—adepts, that is—believe in the existence of dark scholars or grimoire-wielders?" Aris asked.

"Judgin' by how the Dogma doth fervently deny their presence with words like 'find 'em, catch 'em, and burn 'em,' they do exist. But I ain't encountered none, not even sideways. The world ain't yet turned so hellishly wroth upon me," the former priest replied with uncharacteristic self-irony. And he inquired: "A tricky rapier, is it?"

"I'm looking for the line along which order has been disturbed. I can't find it."

"Let the whole earth turn to cinders, no seed to sprout within her, limping down the river of time," the charron hummed.

"So you are a grimoire-wielder, then," Haakon observed.

"Why's that?" the charron asked, surprised.

"A grimoire-wielder is one who doth parley aloud with the beyond. As you dost right now."

"Then what's a dark scholar?"

"Those varlets what use the texts of the Makers in their rites, which they steal from our Order. In the reckonin' of the Order, one needn't achieve any result to be a dark scholar. Perform the rites, and you are a dark scholar."

"So what's a grimoire-wielder then?" Aris asked, confused. "What if he's read those very texts too?"

"A grimoire-wielder must needs have some result, then he's a grimoire-wielder," Haakon insisted.

"And where's the logic in that, old man?"

"Wouldst you be fussin' so much over yon rapier if you hadn't had some result from the beyond, eh?"

"You've a point there, Haakon," the charron smirked. "Not that there's anything supernatural… But Prithrea insisted, on certain occasions, that the rapier be passed strictly from hand to hand. Any notion why?"

Haakon the Good was very quick with his answer:

"Then pass it to yourself and vex yourself no more."

"How do you mean?"

"Shuck your boots off," the old man advised. "Take the rapier first with the toes of your feet, like a gibbon, and then pass it to your own hands. Hands, feet—who up yonder can tell the difference? And what is't you are hummin', if I may ask?"

"There's no one more shifty than a priest," Aris murmured slowly, performing the absurd exercise on Haakon's advice. "It's a little song of the new religion. The Faith of Mutual Breath. You ought to know it."

"Ah, them," Haakon waved a hand and grew gloomy.

"What's the matter? What do they preach?"

"That we are God's shit."

"What are you saying, old man? Who'd pray to that? Are you pulling my leg?"

"Nay, not at all. Negative, my Master," Haakon answered with the formal phrase. "In the books of the Forebears, 'tis described that there be elementals in the guts of men. They, so they say, gnaw the food first, and then the man hisself afterward. 'Tis easier that way, they claim. And a man carries a countless host of 'em inside. And without 'em he'd die. So these folk, of the Mutual Breath, have a notion that God is like a man, and we be like them elementals. The ones what make up the turds in the bowel."

"Oh. Well, now," Aris shook his head. "Thank you for the clarification. And what's that symbol of theirs? All those colored dots?"

"Why, that's us on an overturned roof, Master. When we were a-swimmin' under the bridge. Our bladders."

"We?!" Aris froze in astonishment.

"I'll confess, this long while I thought you wert foolin'. Or testin' somebody. And I played along with your game. But now you hast gone too far, Master. Didst you not set us in that arrow formation with some special purpose? Not so folks would remember?"

"Not in the slightest. Prithrea instructed me to sink the boat ahead of time, so we could scuttle it precisely under the bridge. So we'd vanish into the underpassage. And I placed everyone there purely for reasons of balance: Jinngo was heaviest—there was no one to counterbalance him—so he went to the center, to the bow. Virgilia and the judge stood in the second row because the difference in their weight was greater than between you and me. Because of that, the permissible lever for them was smaller. So they stood closer to the bow and, consequently, closer to each other. That's all. There was nothing more to it."

Haakon stared at the charron with wide eyes.

"That makes it even more astonishin'!" he exclaimed. "I've been afeared to step out o' doors because of all this, and it turns out we was just playin' at keep-ups on some planks."

"What in the world are you afraid of, anyway? The people like this faith," Aris's bewilderment was equally unabated. "There've been no end of religious interpretations of all sorts of things. Why has all the fuss landed on you? No one's pestering me about that business. Quite the opposite, as it happens. Someone gave me a coin the other day."

"Ha! They gave you a coin. You art just seen as a friend, not even an apostle. But I—I'm counted a whole prophet. Dost recall that accursed text of mine on the barter-device?"

"Honestly, no. I remember that there was one, of course. But what exactly was written in the pictograms—I don't recall," the charron answered.

"And I, Master, do not recall either! That be the very rub. But folk's rumor hath pinned on me every text the barrel organ of Prithrea ever spouted after. They've made a psalter out of 'em…"

"Who has?"

"Them that survived the flood, who else? They dreamed up a whole theorarium for themselves, or whatever ye call it in science. And my former bros now want to arrange an unfortunate accident for me. A brick to fall from above, or for my leg to catch an anchor chain at the docks."

"You mentioned an axe before," the charron reminded him. "Where does the hatred come from? Are there insults to the Forebears or the Makers in this psalter?"

"Nay," Haakon waved dismissively. "Not a one."

"Well, what then?"

"I'm a mite tangled in it myself, Master. Jinngo and Virgilia—they be a part of that arrow their own selves. I reckon there be the catch. They've bought off the adepts, like as not."

"What business does the government have with the church? They've always ignored each other."

"That was 'always.' Now it ain't 'always' no more," Haakon said in a mournful tone. "They're chargin' the 'co-breathers' with prophesyin' a new world. That be the matter."

"Ah, now that's politics," the charron drawled. "Is the charge well-founded?"

"Why would they bestir themselves for naught? Aye, there be such a dogma."

"What does it say, exactly?"

"That God always knowed there was somethin' alive in His guts, even somewhat useful dung, and He was indifferent to it…"

"And now suddenly He isn't?" the charron voiced the obvious guess.

"Aye. He hath unbeknownst and unforeseen discovered that the dung hath consciousness. In the form of some manner of unseen sparklettes."

"And therefore a new world will come?"

"That be so," Haakon reported.

"A sensible faith, if you ask me. If I were you, Haakon, I'd take the lead," Aris said. "Well then, are you ready for this evening, good warrior and prophet?"

With a deft, practiced motion, he slid the rapier into the thin steel scabbard that ran exactly along his spine, straight as a rod.

"I be ready, Master. Ready," the old man smiled.

⁂

Toward evening of the appointed day, at the appointed hour, Aris, Haakon, and Ratu approached the spot where the bench once stood, embraced by its stone niche. Now there was a guard post there, painted in diagonal black-and-white stripes. The soldiers' helmets each bore two plumes—one black, one white. 'Symbolizing the royal couple, no doubt,' the charron thought. He had his licensed bow with him. He presented the steel bowstring nock to the guards as his papers. They were let through, and they slowly descended into the underpassage along the corridor they themselves had carved from the stone half a year ago.

In the middle of the vast cavern stood a luxurious general's pavilion, the sort used for setting up headquarters on military campaigns. Illumiros had not waged any wars in all the time this state had been acquainted with written history. Likely, whoever sewed this pavilion had copied it from some children's book. The lighting around the tent was impressive. Driven back by the bright glow at the cavern's center, the darkness in the other parts of the underpassage had thickened immensely.

Inside the tent, thick carpets had been laid. Five heavy armchairs stood in a circle. A low table sat in the center. Altogether, the setting resembled the parlor in the Jinngo clan house on the watershed, but more lavish and ornate. Two chairs were occupied by the former optician and the former questant. Two guards remained outside.

"Going to try to coax me into cooperating, Jinngo? Feeling a bit weak? Has the Faith of Mutual Breath got you sweating?" Aris attacked from the threshold with his visor up. He did not greet Virgilia.

"No precepts, no science can grant power until someone puts specific people in their working places," Jinngo replied. "And you could achieve a great deal with us."

"So far, my only achievement is a resemblance to the very thing I was bequeathed to overcome."

"Bequeathed," Jinngo grimaced. "Brother, you've grown tiresome with this bequest of yours. And if you bring up the penguins again—I'll put out your eye with your own rapier. Do you have it with you? Still unlicensed, yes? Still carry it in your spine?"

The charron did not deny the obvious.

"We have several programs, Aris," Virgilia said. "We fragment the churches to ensure variety. No two parishes will share the same doctrine. We'll align borders with actual strength. Whoever is more effective deserves to cultivate more land. We'll combat the hypocrisy of speech: we'll let pictograms multiply. Why only one hundred and eight? Let there be as many as you like. Then you can record anything you like, without rules that hobble syntax. A sea of work. Why are you sitting in your burrow? Time is passing."

"I'm in no hurry," the charron answered coldly.

"Neither am I," Jinngo flew into a sudden rage. "So what if time is a resource to me and a witness to you? You don't disdain any kind of witness—we've all seen that."

"I can see you've learned to use flaws in the glass to grind lenses, rather than purifying the glass."

"I see no contradiction to nature in the path foreshadowing the result," the optician Jinngo regained his composure. "I must arrest you, you understand."

"I understand. Allow me to go say farewell to her legacy, if you don't mind. Your servants are swarming around the Tower for a reason. By the time I get out of this dungeon—if I get out—there'll be nothing left here."

The royal couple exchanged a glance.

"You're right about that. This will be our new palace. We'll build it atop and around the Seventh Tower. But hand over the rapier. Forgive me—security."

Aris drew the rapier from its scabbard and from his pocket produced four wooden styluses, each the length of his palm. He took a pair of these sticks in

each hand, forming peculiar little fists, and laid the rapier between the styluses. Thus he extended it toward the optician Jinngo.

"What is this you're doing?" the latter asked, alarmed by the strange gesture.

So Aris simply dropped the rapier at the feet of the former optician, now Chancellor.

Jinngo hesitated a moment, then picked up the rapier. There were no witnesses to his humiliation in the tent. He immediately checked for the presence of the god's hair within, flicking the tip sideways and slicing through a metal nail which he had, apparently, kept ready for this very purpose.

'Let him go,' Aris could have sworn that was what Jinngo whispered to Virgilia, weighing the heavy, slender blade in his hands. 'Without the rapier he can't escape. There are guards outside. Only one way out.'

Jinngo gave a slight flick of his right wrist—outward, away from himself: "Go."

The three of them left the tent and headed toward the windmill.

'Don't look back,' Jinngo could have sworn that was what Haakon whispered to Aris. 'Only a woman cannot help but turn to look upon that which she hath put so much soul into.'

¶

Fragment 32: The Rebound of Ousted Complexity

¶

An unexpected noise can pique one's interest. It can frighten one. Jinngo and Virgilia did both. They stepped out of the tent.

"Well, it's begun," Jinngo said with a sickly anticipation.

In the distance, by the mill, a brawl had broken out. As far as the poor lighting allowed one to judge, Haakon had tore the head off one of the guards, while the judge had managed to slip a garrote around another's neck. Jinngo the optician's instinct was to run and help, or at least get a better look at what had happened, but Virgilia seized his arm:

"We are merely spectators here, young man. Have you forgotten?"

An arrow whistled past in an unusually slow flight. A thin line trailed behind it. Soon it pulled taut, and from the direction of the mill came the screech and clank of reduction gears. Three convicts were turning the mill wheel by hand, and the line, leading into a second-story window, was gradually tightening.

"Right then, we're moving topside," Virgilia said, irritated that she had to drag the Chancellor along almost by force. "Out! The last thing we need is to catch a stray bullet. Diligent Forebears, you are insufferably difficult to work with."

A torrent rushed into the dungeon, and that spurred even the former optician into motion. By the time they reached the exit, the water had already filled half the cavern. A black carriage with no windows bobbed on the surface. The line tethered it to a square, almost smooth recess in the wall. Water was gushing into that hole, and the carriage was moving against the current, hauled outward by the rope.

Outside, the guard and the retinue awaited the Chancellor and his wife, but Jinngo pleaded:

"Oh, let's just look! Card-Panso hinted the show would be spectacular."

"As spectacular as when he had giraffes drag tarpaulins painted with a house and a target-door back and forth across the lot?" Virgilia hissed. "Get a hold of yourself. A Chancellor, on my hands. To the carriage!"

And indeed, Jinngo looked foolish flailing about with a naked rapier inappropriately. Worrying about the scabbard beforehand had simply not occurred to him.

"We'd only need to walk around the tower," Jinngo persisted. "Where is your questant's curiosity?"

That did the trick.

"Guard, with me," she commanded, and Jinngo all but skipped toward that section of the wall which offered a clear view of the moat. Virgilia was forced to quicken her pace as well, so as not to stretch the security perimeter.

A large hole gaped in the ice of the moat. When the black carriage surfaced within it, the line stretching upward from it became visible. The other end of the tether vanished into the low cloud cover. The line began to angle gradually toward the surface plane of the Cylinder, and the carriage began to move slowly. A volley of musket fire that immediately followed the surfacing should have riddled the carriage with holes. Perhaps it did. No damage was visible. Perhaps due to the deepening twilight.

The creature pulling the carriage could not be seen. However, it was easy to guess it was a pterodactyl. A highly impractical solution under normal circumstances: a winged lizard could not lift a man, let alone a carriage. But in this situation, it was the only choice. Any other draft power would have been shot dead already. A pause ensued while the weapons were reloaded. At that moment, the lizard swooped sharply lower, the vector of force shifted, and the carriage accelerated significantly. A cannon boomed. A new hole appeared in the ice. Hitting even a stationary target with a cannon is no simple task.

Just then, a hunchback—or, rather, a hunchfront—clambered out of the moving carriage. He climbed onto the roof and began some absurd, wild dance. He would turn, pause, turn again. Then he began to spin and shout something. It sounded like common dockside profanity. As soon as the first shot of the new volley rang out, the dancing man threw himself flat on the carriage roof, and the pterodactyl soared upward. Thus the black carriage departed: with a man sprawled upon its roof. First across the ice of the moat, then along the road. By the time the third volley was ready, it was out of range.

"Shall we organize a pursuit, your excellency?" asked the platoon commander. "Duty bound to inquire, in all gravity."

"Stand down," Virgilia said.

When the soldier had withdrawn, she turned to Jinngo the optician.

"Let them flee, if any survived. I understand my enemies; they simply want something different from what I do. But that twisted hunchfront frightens me because he makes me doubt my own righteousness. And dead, the bastard might prove even more dangerous."

"You're right," Jinngo agreed. "He made our purpose seem dim. You think they took the Firsts?"

"Of course. And we shall live as if our lives depend on it," Virgilia said.

"Yes, my dear. I think death is merely the absence of new information about life," Chancellor Jinngo said, putting an arm around her.

"Can you explain to me, Jinngo," she whispered in his ear, "why neither of us even thought to look inside that hearse back then?"

At that moment, the Chief of the State Guard approached with a brisk step and clicked his heels. Virgilia pulled away from her husband and curled her little fingers inward. Jinngo noticed the gesture, lowered his eyes, and put the rapier behind his back.

"There may be survivors, my lady," the officer said meaningfully. "Duty bound to report, in all gravity."

"Everyone in there's been shot a dozen times over," Virgilia replied, "through and through. Sending men after them is a waste of coin."

"And the lizard? Duty bound to inquire, in all gravity."

"It'll bite through the line itself at the watershed and return to its stable, whoever owns it. By the way, relay my order to the questants. Have them check—whose is it?"

"And the carriage? Duty bound to inquire, in all gravity."

"Scrap. Doesn't even have windows. Forget it. Maybe someone will pick it up. I don't care. Bury the bodies while they're at it, I hope."

She turned, and the two plumes on her hat—one black, one white—swayed with finality, signaling the conversation was over. Over her shoulder, she told the officer:

"Report if any extra bodies are found in the water."

⁂

The spouses knew that the nocturnal weight of deeds which break no law yet chafe the inner codex loses its sharpness by morning, not due to a hardening of the soul, but because of the very structure of existence.

Thus, the next morning, Jinngo and his wife gladly graced the Beam-Light Run—the most prestigious athletic competition—with their presence. Prithrea's rapier was with the Chancellor; now, in an elegant scabbard. Their mood was festive. The vast government box in the stands was decorated accordingly.

The slender bridges, five leagues in length and designed for a roughly half-hour race, were straight in the mathematical sense. They were chords of the Cylinder and aligned strictly perpendicular to the Axis. An athlete racing across such a bridge spent the first half of the course running uphill, in terms of gravity. The second half of the course ran, correspondingly, downhill.

"How are you this morning, daughter?" Virgilia heard the question in her right ear. "Did you send the First Chancellor off to the Caldera?"

The head of the Armorers' Guild, old Armoor, had seated himself beside her. The Chancelloress shifted her jaw in annoyance—the race had not yet begun, there was no good pretext, and it would be exceedingly rude to brush off her interlocutor immediately.

"In the morning there are no mirrors, only shop windows. I sent him, I sent him," she grumbled.

"There are rumors of shooting at the Seventh Tower last evening. What went wrong?"

"They scared off some vagrants as a precaution. Guards aren't going to stop and figure out if it's drunken merchants or malefactors. Everything is fine, Father. You are spoiling my holiday."

"Our Forebears entered into a compact, sealed by tethers of lieving, with an individual who subsequently became the First Chancellor. I cannot be at ease."

"I have heard this seven hundred times, Father. And for the seven hundredth time I tell you: events predating the Crossing on the stone vessels carry no legal weight. Just as, for that matter, the Crossing itself is not recognized as a historical fact."

For the first time in recorded history, the races were held on straight bridges of transparent steel. This allowed spectators to see the second runner moving directly beneath the bridge, for whom the course was flat in a gravitational sense. Another convenience was that the transverse white lines on the bridges, dividing the distance into ten equal parts, allowed time to be marked for both the lower and upper runner. This permitted analysts to draw preliminary conclusions about the contest's progress mid-race. Since wagers were accepted right up until the halfway point, with odds increasing as the race went on, the transparency promised to significantly boost the bookmakers' profits.

"Are you going to place a wager?" Virgilia asked her father.

"I think, daughter," the old man waved her off with annoyance, "life will teach you soon enough that this compact is the only thing to be taken seriously."

"Teach me how? I'm not being sarcastic, Father. I'm genuinely curious about your prognosis. What threat do I face?"

"You used to leap and bound; your strength was spent fighting a clear enemy. But now, every action you take heats your own house to a sear. Cool down. Everything is cracking already. The compact is the only thing worth working for."

"No specifics. I don't understand any of that."

"It was all simple. Some were for preserving the Code of Inviolable Formularies. The rest were against it. But that is not the structure of the world. That was merely a lens through which we peered, so as not to be blinded by complexity," the armorer whispered fervently. "The world you simplified is beginning to take its revenge with a new complexity."

"So what? You think I can't figure out who is plotting what?"

"Of course not. Your victory did not bring you peace. It merely knocked the lock off a cage where momentarily quieted imps were sitting. Including your own inner ones."

There were thirteen bridges in all, and the vast field of a dozen square leagues, visible as on the palm of a hand, was staggering in its grandeur. The expenditure

of such significant funds for construction was made possible not only by investments from the betting houses but also by the piquant fact that the Chancellor himself had personally conducted the development of transparent steel. Prithrea's role in state propaganda was, naturally, omitted.

"I know, Father. Heroism is for war. Pettifoggery is for peace. I act with that understanding. Card-Panso is escorting the First Chancellor to the Caldera. A more resourceful individual cannot be found. Besides, his family has some similar obsessive notion."

"I would never have introduced you to your husband, had a descendant of the man who served as the First Chancellor's assistant back when he was a mere querist not been in service to his family."

"I won't hide it, I regard their institution of assistantship with the same skepticism I hold for your Compact..."

"Our Compact!"

"Fine, our Compact. What I see first and foremost in this compact is that, according to it, we alone are bound to do something. What exactly, is unclear. The First Chancellor, however, bears no obligations whatsoever. How convenient!"

"The First Chancellor fulfilled his part at the moment the Compact was sealed," Armoor hissed terribly.

"Let it be so, let it be so," Virgilia said placatingly. "Don't be angry. I have pleasant news for you: Prithrea's rapier is now with Jinngo the optician. You will be able to examine the unique weapon."

The old man visibly shuddered.

"What have you done! The weapon must remain with the First Chancellor! Give it to me this instant! I will set out for the Caldera to return it."

"Well, you'll have to discuss that with Jinngo the optician. I don't advise distracting him now. Seriously. You won't get the rapier at all then. Ever. Come after dinner."

"Madness!"

"And think of a good pretext. I have no intention of quarreling with my husband over your superstitions."

"Aren't they rather excessive scaffolding?" the father said sadly, pointing at the bridges. "For such a narrow, repetitive contour of an idea. Approach, refusal on the hill, the orgasmic failure of defeat..."

"Not you, dear father, to accuse anyone of fetishistic displacements. Not with your outfits."

"You are only partly right. In my case, there is no indifference of the object around which striving subjects vainly erect cathedrals of unnecessary meaning."

⁂

At dinner, Jinngo was in excellent spirits.

"The transparent steel worked out, eh?" he could not contain his delight at his own success.

"You doubted it? After using it to discredit Aris?"

Jinngo leaned his large back against the chair, and the expensive wood creaked in mild protest. Light from the tall window fell slantwise across the long dining table, and Jinngo imagined it as his new steel. It was pleasant. Just yesterday, overly insistent light would have hinted at those capable of seeing more than they ought. But today, Jinngo was in a steel calm.

"That's precisely why I doubted it, my dear," Jinngo admitted. "The narrative setting among the people was not in my favor. A man used my new material to claim a power he did not possess."

"You're right," Virgilia agreed. "What are they saying now? Have you had reports?"

"Couldn't be better: the transparency of firm rules of play!" Jinngo proclaimed.

A barely perceptible shadow crossed Virgilia's brow. Jinngo was attentive to his wife:

"What's wrong?"

He reached for the water carafe to fill her glass. Yet the coziness somehow evaporated the moment his fingers touched the cool, clear glass. A vile ancient superstition, that good things cannot last, slipped him a fleeting vision of himself pouring poison for her now. His throat suddenly went dry, and he took a sip himself.

"You know, the narrative setting kicked in for me too," Virgilia did not hide it. "This whole game we're playing—it's turning out there are no white and black pieces, no victories and defeats. It's as if we're simply losing count of the players."

"Did your papa upset you? I told you: distance yourself from your kin. As I have done."

"My father never humiliated me. Don't say nasty things. But yes—he spoiled my mood. He kept bringing up the Compact our Forebears made with the First Chancellor. I understand it all, and we've discussed it seven hundred times, but I still feel a bit sick that we sent them off who knows where. It feels somewhat like we've desecrated corpses."

"Otherwise we would be the corpses," Jinngo bristled. "It took only one Selene in the autumn for everything to turn in our favor. Now the same thing would have happened, only in reverse."

"That is our error, Father said: that we think in such terms. This way, and then the reverse way."

"Is he quibbling over words? I don't follow."

"He meant that back then, everything was simple. Some were for preserving the Code of Inviolable Formularies. The rest were against it. We were among those against. We won. It all seemed clear. But that is not the structure of the world. That was merely a lens through which we peered, so as not to be blinded by complexity."

"The bramble take this complexity," Jinngo said. "Kill problems as their bearers arrive at your doorstep."

"Before, we knew who would kill us. Now we don't know who we are," Virgilia shook her head. "That is the problem."

Jinngo rose from the table and paced across the spacious dining hall. He was careful not to pass behind his wife's back. He sat down again.

"Are you afraid that Card-Panso will ultimately be our ruin somehow? If we strip away all the grand philosophizing—is that it?"

"Well, one could put it that way too."

"Their Line went into service only because libraries fell out of favor. My Line remembers his Line from the most ancient times, even before the stone vessels," Jinngo laid both hands on the table.

His palms were dry and hot; he could feel a bread crumb stuck under his fingernail. He could not, of course, remove it with a toothpick—far too vulgar. He wanted to will the crumb out of his space, and in a futile motion, he clenched his fingers as tightly as he could. Naturally, he achieved nothing.

"Excessive pathos, in my opinion. Sorry," Virgilia said. "Before the crossing from the old continent to here, after the crossing. What does it change? People can overturn all their narrative settings overnight, as you put it. Take me, for instance. I became a dreadful harpy in one Selene. And I can't help myself. And what's more important—I don't want to."

"It changes a great deal. In our Lines, everyone was a merchanter."

"Enchanters?"

"No. A merchanter is one referred to in the Code as a commercial liar, who, by cooperating with both seller and buyer, helped them conclude transactions. There were other functions, but that was the main one. The seller and the buyer, naturally, wish to outmaneuver one another, and it almost always descends into the realm of falsehood, when an unreasonably high price is asked for a good, or vice versa."

"There are firmabiders now, with that exact function," Virgilia objected.

"A great difference. Back then, people truly could not lie. Not formally, not informally, not at all. Physically. Only merchanters could."

"How is that possible?!" Virgilia marveled. "And furthermore, how is it that I don't know this?"

"Because your Line is not former merchanters..."

"But the Compa—" Virgilia interrupted.

"Your compact, the existence of which I do not doubt—don't misunderstand... how shall I put this... it's an accident. The First Rulers were figures of special standing in history. They had dealings, true dealings, with very few. I confess, aside from Card-Panso's family and your Line, the Armoors, I've not heard of any others. Though, of course, there must be others. They are evidently beyond the border."

"So how did it work?"

"No one knows," Jinngo said.

"Well then..." Virgilia drawled. "Just like the reason Prithrea needed to make swords out of transparent steel. What is the point? That's another thought gnawing at me. Suppose we are violating a covenant by our inaction..."

Just then, a cautious scratching came at the dining hall door from the butler:

"Your father is here, madam—duty bound to report with all gravity."

"Show him in."

Jinngo finally extracted the bothersome crumb, taking advantage of his wife's distraction.

⁂

"Greetings, dear father-in-law. Have some tea with us," Jinngo valued his good relations with Virgilia's father and was even somewhat proud of them.

"Hello, Virgilia. Greetings, good Jinngo. You are the hero of Illumiros today. They're already making up street ditties about your bridges."

And Armoor, with surprising skill, sang out:

"Under the bridge, no thieves are lurking—there the bookmakers' debates are working. Face above, and face below—the Wonder-Bridge pierced the chord just so... Avertigo, like a beam of light, but that's not the main delight. The wonder is, it's crystal clear—like heaven's glow, and far more dear. We see the ones atop the span—and just as clear, the lower man."

Jinngo shone like polished table silver.

"Speaking of transparent steel. What do you think, my illustrious father-in-law, could be the utility of producing swords, rapiers, and other weapons from it?"

Virgilia tilted her face down and to the right, shielding the left side with her palm, but Armoor, fortunately, did not notice her censorious, embarrassed gesture.

"A sword is a social phenomenon," Armoor said after a moment's thought. "Something communal. A matter of status."

"I thought perhaps it might be useful in combat?" Jinngo ventured. "The opponent wouldn't see where the blade ends."

"No, there's no great sense in that," the old man politely dismissed his son-in-law's foolishness. "What prompted the thought?"

Jinngo hesitated. Lying is difficult in general. To elders—even more so. To one's wife's father—downright unbearably unpleasant.

"Prithrea's notion," Jinngo said, which was part of the truth.

"Ahh. Well, she's mad. There may be no reason at all."

Jinngo the optician felt a weight lift from his heart. And he got carried away. Which, evidently, was precisely what Virgilia had feared.

"Who is she, do you know?" Jinngo asked the old man.

"Their Line, like ours, is a Line with a long memory. They live as recluses. Only the young come to the cities. Once in a generation. To see the world. They are few."

"Have you ever seen their men?"

"I have not. But they exist," Armoor laughed.

"What do they do? She once called herself a 'lectotype'."

"Many ancient professions are lost. That, apparently, is one of them. I confess, I am inclined not to complicate matters. I think they are simply smugglers."

"But that requires warehouses, many people."

"Not at all. One can trade in unicorn horns, for instance," Armoor replied.

"Those don't exist."

"Precisely the point. They pass off narwhal tusks as a miraculous cure for male impotence, for example, grind them into powders, sell them at fairs through peddlers," the old man recited in an indifferent tone. "Tell me rather, are you ready to repeat your success? Let us establish the production of god's hair. Just imagine the prospects."

The suggestion caught Jinngo the optician off guard.

"You are no naturalist. What could you possibly know on that score?" he asked suspiciously.

"But I am the chief of armaments," Armoor easily accepted the challenge. "We'll figure something out. We'll examine your rapier with minikin glasses and copy it. You will provide us with the finest minikin glasses this world has to offer. Shake down your relatives. Thoroughly."

Virgilia suddenly clapped her hands. The butler entered. She tasked him with bringing sweets. She inquired about the weather. Immediately thereafter, she asked her father about his plans. Armoor was not fooled by such stratagems.

"Listen, Jinngo," he said. "You do not possess the rapier. It has possessed that part of you which accounts for your uniqueness."

Jinngo looked inward and answered:

"You are right, dear father-in-law. But to mass-produce it would be a polite form of murdering the original."

"The original is mortal. The technology is immortal," the father-in-law countered. "To multiply a miracle, one must first cease believing in its singularity."

Virgilia suddenly decided to support her father:

"You, my dear, are like that dragon from the fairytales, sitting on a hoard of all the world's gold. But gold must be spent to become currency. If you spend it, there is less of it—true. But not spending it is worse."

Jinngo shook his head, then shuddered—with his whole body.

Rationalizing his impotence, Jinngo calculated that refusing the inertia of events was too cunning a blessing. Nervy oscillations at the last moment were the action of the second derivative. He knew this as a man well-versed in mathematics. Then, like a true Chancellor, he reassigned his doubts a new title—from "weakness" to "final verification of authenticity." And he calmed down.

"Fine. Here. Copy it," he said, unfastening the scabbarded rapier from his belt. "It's barely been a couple of days, and I've already become nothing more than the guardian of the possibility of its loss. I'd rather attend to your daughter."

At the door, Armoor lingered a moment longer than usual:

"Be well, Jinngo. Fare thee well, daughter."

¶

Fragment 33. Armoor's Journey

¶

What horror! If you seek a solution to the tangled affairs of men, choose the most idiotic explanation—you won't go wrong. On the other hand, chaos is energetically cheaper than order. Thus thought the armorer as he departed the residence of the Chancellor and Chancelloress. The rapier bobbed stupidly against his thigh in a scabbard that was not his size. It had never occurred to the enormous optician Jinngo to order adjustable straps. Which, in fairness, was reasonable enough.

He stepped outside. The vast volume of existence. White. Silver. Precious deep edges of clouds. Towering, world-spanning clouds. Higher than the sky, like gigantic milk-cap mushrooms, in flashes and pillars of white and azure. A mass of inner-white set upon the sky in such a way that the traces of God's immeasurable palms, which had gently placed this froth into the world, were still visible but swiftly fading. It moves so as to bestow calm through the measured motion of the whole mass, and to make one abandon the pursuit of its kinetics by the quick dissolution of its contours. This is a good sign.

The armorer wore a magnificent raiment. It would aid him on his journey. The azure and silver fabric was not smooth. Hundreds of minute folds were traced fluidly across the body. There was no symmetry in the lines; they obeyed a botanical logic. Such clothes might have been grown in greenhouses in some other world. Here, the attire of the guild master represented an immense volume of effort. The labor of dozens of people over many sennights was invested in this garment. Armoor returned home and packed two more ensembles into his travel bag. Of different colors and cuts.

He deliberated, then changed his clothes. He now wore an outfit that would appear best when mounted upon a swift ostrich. Malice requires coordination, secrecy, intellect, and discipline. Stupidity requires only an absence of attention. Armoor wished to appear stupid to Nature. Therefore, he occupied all his attention with matters unrelated to his business, so that his business might not receive a second's thought.

He rides toward the peak of the Great Mountain. That is all. No further planning. Yet Armoor would not have been a great armorer if a good solution regarding weaponry had not come to him of its own accord. And so it did. An hour or two later, its execution arrived as well, by the hands of craftsmen in the city's finest armory. He takes two ostriches from the stable, binds them together with a broad strap some ten paces long. He clambers onto the one in front. The ascent has begun.

⁂

Ostriches are exceedingly swift of foot. Changing mounts each hour, with three stops to allow the birds to graze, by the morning of the next day Armoor had reached lands where the roads ended. The air had grown thinner, yet breathing was easy. These parts are the most dangerous. It is precisely here that fugitives and outcasts become stranded in their flight—there is no sense in moving farther and exhausting one's breath with suffering.

⁂

For a long while, the way led through forest. The ground was covered in small hillocks, as if a boar's bristle had sprouted from a toad's hide. Patches of moss stood high, lying like unmelted snow in the lowlands of the River.

Armoor glimpsed a clearing among the trees ahead, some fifty paces distant, and, yielding to a surge of novelty, spurred toward the glade. With the crack of branches underfoot, he burst out onto the open space. From five directions, five bolts, loaded into five crossbows, stared at him. In addition, off to the side—a woman with a sword. One must assume the ostrich's footfalls had warned the bowwomen and the swordswoman early enough for them to regroup from their camp in the glade's center.

Armoor is no warrior, but he knows everything about weapons. And over long evenings, weapons had told him what they themselves knew of combat skirmishes. A man has five fingers on a hand. This is no accident. Five is the limit of what can be instantaneously encompassed by the controlling consciousness. The five warrior women formed a single unit. The sixth did not hinder them. Five is the final circle wherein each hears every other. Six is already noise. "Competent," Armoor noted to himself with regret. "The indifference of the sixth stream."

Masks of impassivity. Attentive long bridges of the nose. No—it was a trick of the light. They were clearly intoxicated. But still very dangerous. Perhaps more so than if they had been sober.

The flight of leaves and petals in the slanting rays of light cut by the forest canopy. The composure of blue-black chitons reaching to the heels. The curves of solid hips. The buzzing of bumblebees placed on pause. Their figures swayed like trees in a faint wind.

One had a light-brown coiffure pinned up with a multitude of wooden clasps. On her long, lovely neck—a bright spot of light, miraculously piercing through the forest's many trunks. Her cheek and temple were less fortunate—the light settled there in pink. Two locks of fringe created a loophole for a pair of calm eyes and a defiant chin. The second woman tilted her snub nose skyward at the angle artillerymen usually select for distant fire. Pitch-black hair was drawn back into a pony tail by a force that was brutal, veterinary. It seemed the strain had touched her hollow cheeks as well. The third wore a small turban of two colors. Lilac and lime. Her young face expressed a tired pity. The fourth was on the verge of consciousness. Her eyes had rolled back from the narcotic; the whites only faintly showed through the narrow slits of blissful lids. Her lips were half open, her face thrown back. It was unclear how she remained on her feet at all. The fifth was much older. She stood there with a bull-like sullenness. An unkempt shock of hair spread dust about itself with every motion. The face of the sixth was hidden beneath the folds of a black kerchief.

"Permit me to introduce myself," one of the archers announced in a well-trained and perfectly sober voice. "I am Berta. This is Sarra, Revecca, Adel, Anna. Oh yes—and also Ida. Ida is sometimes called Blighty. Forgive us generously, we lack the means for breast insignia. But I am prepared to fill the gap: we are forest brigands. Have you heard of such a profession?"

Since Berta was speaking, Armoor now made her out as well—her face revealed itself. It consisted of lilac petals shaped like dragonfly wings and green leaves of the sharpest disposition imaginable.

All six huddled together. "Saved!" Armoor realized. Five people constitute an organism. Six people constitute a mechanism. An organism feels pain and moves. A mechanism creaks and jams. In a group of five, there is a minority that can be peaceably squeezed out by vote. In a group of six, there is an ineradicable opposition that prevents motion. Now time was working for him. Berta, removing her kerchief, revealed to the forest and to men a red hat. No, not like that: a Red Riding Hood. Her headwear consisted of two parts. The lower part resembled a small skillet with high sides. The upper part resembled thick rye leaven that had already begun to rise. "Every misfit is a verdict upon fashion," Armoor thought.

The hat comically crushed Berta's auricles. "All ears, are we," Armoor muttered involuntarily.

It was precisely because of these ears that Armoor did not respond to Berta's introduction, continuing to remain silent.

"He doesn't look like a courier to me," Sarra squinted suspiciously. "Why are we so dolled up?"

Adel, Sarra, and Berta exchanged glances. Adel pondered:

"Not actionable."

"I..." the armorer began, but Berta sharply cut him off:

"Tut-tut-tut," she wagged the index finger of her right hand, "I choose the topics of dialogue here." She waved at Anna.

"What are you hauling?" Anna asked in a customs officer's tone.

"That which belongs to a friend of my daughter's," Armoor replied firmly.

"Who are you hauling it to?" Anna interrogated.

"Charron Aris," Armoor did not consider it necessary to debase himself with a lie.

"The hunchfront? They say the real Aris was a doctor," Ida—or Blighty?—suddenly said.

The sixth woman's entry into the conversation shifted the register of the world from the benign pentagon to the vicious hexagon. The even number six created a deceptive equilibrium of triads, trapping the world around them in a dead end. In such a dead end, negotiations perish, and a war of attrition begins. In these instants, Armoor still grasped the essence of what was occurring. He managed to realize that the narcotic within the maidens was not only inside them—pollen or spores had begun to enter Armoor's nose and deeper into his system. The conversation drifted past him.

"Honorary doctor," said Revecca. "A man of knowledge."

"He wanted to possess too much, and paid for it," said Adel.

"Doctor of Theology or Doctor of Medicine?" Their voices merged into a mixed buzzing of bees and beetles.

"I think he grew weary of scholasticism."

"Precisely. But he heals poorly. He maims, rather."

"Avertigus, in the end, is a sick man. What sort of doctor kills his patient?"

"Succubus-succubus," Revecca hissed especially sharply, "he hides the evidence. Uses illness as an opportunity."

"Hattab-hattab," Sarra rumbled, "why hasn't anyone clipped the coattails of his beetle-like frock coat?"

"They should have cut off his hands," their voices merged into a hum again.

"They did cut them off, but not from the one who can distinguish the long-lived ones—which is son, which is father."

"Should have poisoned him."

"They dance about the mountains, try poisoning that."

"Such a man would even present his own father's death as part of a deal."

"Of course, all the pathos and heroism is always scenery. And behind it stands a banal, ancient, vile human motive."

"What does the old man want, then?"

"Diligent Forebears, what else but lust or obsession can move men?" said Ida. Blighty.

"So there is smoke without fire?"

"Pure fire—as much as you like."

"In the circus, do they jump through such?"

"Exactly, exactly."

"He's jumped his last."

"Shouldn't have planted the pig."

"He's planted one on just about everyone."

"And given them a leg up, too."

"Like a decoy duck."

"I don't need a duck. I came to fish," the armorer cut short the tiresome clamor. "And you are not very polite."

In his hand was a long, slender pole, indeed reminiscent of the fishing rods used by coastal sea anglers. Those who do not trouble themselves to put out to sea in a boat or vessel. He displayed his innocuous instrument so clumsily that the woman at the end of the line lazily moved to swat the rod aside. Instead, however, her sword silently divided into two parts. And then the five women also divided, roughly in half.

God's hair, arrayed in a long queue of solitary elementals of substance, cannot touch anything. It is so fine that it always misses the existent matter of which everything consists. Yet the bonds between the small particles of existence are forced to sever: the chain of god's hair elementals is exceedingly strong. The bisecting of the group of women began at the knees of the first to fall under the thinnest and most terrible of all scythes. The second divided at mid-thigh, with the right severed near the knee and the left noticeably closer to the pelvis. The third was entirely unfortunate—all the organs of her abdomen split asunder. The fourth parted at the level of the chest. The fifth lost… no, that is the wrong word… the rapier did not sever… the fifth was deprived of her head, in a manner that seemed melancholy, as if her smile had become the final boundary of her jaw. Her slashed red hat lay strewn upon the ground in a chaotic pattern of ribbons.

A "dumaala" turban—which the "hat" was—cannot be empty. Armoor knew this, being a seasoned connoisseur of flamboyant attire. Important attributes are traditionally woven into such "dastars." And this turban was no exception—it served as a safe. A multitude of brightly gleaming coins spilled onto the ground. Some sort of groats. But most importantly, a dense cloud of the very narcotic which the brigand maidens had apparently been abusing now hung in the air.

Before Armoor's counterfeit gaze flitted a vision of a girl in a red riding hood setting thirty-three wolves free. In the music of hidden entanglement, being for a time one of the trees, Armoor now hearkened to the mycelium as an extension of himself. His nerves, however, dangled outside like a carnival costume plastered by heavy rain. And his stomach was communal, because of which the vile sensation of pre-vomit did not retreat for an instant. The warm, kind earth, instead of being a support for roots, became the latticed wicket of a gatekeeper at the city wall, who assesses through it whether it is even worth speaking to a belated traveler. But then the roots became hands. Including the roots of neighboring trees. "My roots are my fingers," the sensation deepened. Thoughts scattered like ripe fungal spores. The tree gave up a part of its life. The wondrous compact of exchange compelled Armoor to grant the branching giants access to

his memory. "My self and my selves pay with light for the right to feel the earth," the trees whispered to him. "To be alone is to rot with time," the trees cooed to one another. Then Armoor understood that the tallest tree in the forest is not the one that reaches highest toward the sky, but the one whose roots are deepest entwined with the dark.

"You unwashed merkin!" a foul curse suddenly rang out.

One of the women had managed to duck beneath the rapier. She had dodged, and now her gaze mocked him. As if to say, "You thought the strongest wore the reddest turban. But no! We shall dance with you yet."

Armoor offered up a prayer for salvation to Avertigus, but the latter recommended appealing to a certain Klogt. Armoor knew no Klogt, and therefore resolved to rely solely upon himself. Unfortunately, this proved no simple task, as at that moment Armoor was, for some reason, standing on the street of an unfamiliar town.

A crowd was ahead in the square. He inquired of the onlookers what the matter was. It turned out the kernel of the event was the recent occurrences in the Fatherate. No doubt they had "solved" yesterday's crime. He asked further; it emerged that the fort authorities had found one living criminal, as well as one dead one, whose involvement had been determined by the slander of the living. Such is the power of vivifying torture—any man can become a bit of a merchanter before an execution. The already heavily rotting corpse of a certain karl had been brought to light that morning. First, it was dragged from the family crypt and thrown onto unconsecrated ground outside the city walls. Then, after the second session of the court, it was dragged back again, straight through the streets, by the very rope upon which the still-living man would soon be hanged. Individuals thronged both the streets and the balconies to witness it. Children. Some individuals even with suckling babes in arms. The walls upon which these balconies were built were lit by the afternoon sun, inappropriately beautiful as it pierced through the foliage of the tall city maples. Even the laundry hung out to dry did not spoil the picture. One might well commission a fresco of the execution scene.

¶

"Bear in mind, Magister, I am aware of your… rare gift," Blighty stood at the ready five paces away. "Well, try and mount an attack."

A single opponent. Just one. This is a great handicap. Armoor's "I" coalesced and literally flash-froze the forest brigand's consciousness in the chill of timelessness.

Take that. A lunge! But instead of the maiden's nape, what awaited him was a dagger in her left hand, staring coldly up at Armoor, along with a jutting indifferent elbow. Her torso, along with her head and skull, of course, was far forward, in a deep stoop. Her rhomphaia remained near the ground in her right hand.

"Ah." Was all Armoor could force out.

"Well now," she straightened up unhurriedly, "experto crede. And never, I beg you, count on a different turn of events."

"Maestro Armoor, with my humble assistance, might you deign to refine your image a tad," Klogt, appearing from nowhere, extended a cane to Armoor. Or perhaps this cane had been lying on the ground, and the armorer had only contrived to snatch it up in a lightning stoop? Be that as it may, it was not a cane but rather a bone. But whose?!

"Yes, the zoologists will be surprised," remarked the still-present Klogt at Armoor's bewilderment. "It is the bone of that membranous half-lizard, the brother of the stubborn creature who carried off your friends."

Armoor took the cane in his hand. And felt a certain glitch in his sensations. He wondered for a moment if another dose of the narcotic had spilled out from somewhere. But no, the bone was simply extraordinarily light. It was two bones, adjoining one another. They had been articulated just so in the living organism—so the experienced armorer understood. Armoor found the spring catch; the second, smaller co-bone swung aside. The result was something like a pickaxe. Its end was fiercely sharp—Armoor knew this in advance. And not thanks to sharpening. The fracture of the bone itself cut; to know this, one need not run a finger across it perpendicularly, as is done when testing a knife's keenness.

"Precisely," Klogt confirmed the rightness of Armoor's imagined gesture, "when it splinters, it shall remain sharp. A beast-fowl, a blasted fiddle-faddle. Where's the rector with his wheels compared to this. A snett."

"Thank you, Rector," the armorer replied.

Armoor hacked through Blighty's clavicle with the pickaxe without a grain of strain.

"Pray advise me how to reach the Caldera," the armorer requested politely, and inclined his ear toward the last intact brigand, who had fallen to her knees. The pickaxe had proven to be a weapon of a different order.

Satisfied with the answer, he concluded what had been forced upon him, finishing off those brigands whom the pickaxe had cut too close to the ground.

When the fog and the daze lifted, he stood over the bodies. The ostriches were placidly nibbling moss off to the side. It was past midday. He continued on his way. Had it not been for the ostriches, and had he been forced to walk, he would have made use of his new little cane—so weary was he. But as things stood, the cane simply joined his modest baggage.

⁂

Seated astride the ostrich, Armoor presented a magnificent spectacle. Besides the well-balanced "fishing rod," into one end of which Prithrea's rapier was incorporated, his pantaloons merited attention. Endowed with an elevated sense of the resultant force's direction, he could permit himself to sit with his legs tucked beneath him—much like those artistes who charm snakes with a pipe. A portion of the fabric thicket of his trousers thereby appears as the base of an enormous flower. A witness unversed in the local life-forms might have thought that the splendid old man had grown upon this running bird like a berry or a fruit. Armoor was brimming with his self. This was not exclusively tied to what had just occurred; no. On the whole, Armoor had always kept in mind that the ancient tradition regards the "self" as an illusion—a persistent sense of continuity that does not withstand attentive analysis. Armoor, observing his own mind from the point where his fishing rod ended, found no thinker there.

He knew that plants "hear," that is, they react to the sound of chewing caterpillars, secreting something in response. He also knew that they "see," altering the shape of their leaves to mimic the host plant for the sake of invisibility. Therefore, he learned from plants. He had yet to learn to "hear" as plant roots find water by the sounds of streams. Sometimes he wondered, do they feel pain? Finding no answer, he endeavored simply not to feel pain. Including the pain of others. The design of an animal requires intellect. The stupidity of a plant works autonomously and unfailingly. Evil can be exposed and opposed. Stupidity is impervious to logic.

As the elevation above sea level increased, it grew warmer, for cold air favors the lowlands of Avertigus. The forests did not become denser, however, as the air thinned. The species of plants changed. The forests of giant sequoias began. Unlike almost all people, Armoor did not feel a painful lack of air. An ordinary person on such a path requires two or three stops to acclimatize. Each lasting a sennight. Armoor made do with frequent stops of a couple of hours. There are ad-

vantages to feeling like a plant. The ostriches, however, he had to release to go home.

And so now he rested upon a comfortable platform. He noted the excesses of living nature. In every convenient triangle between slender branches—a cobweb. As if there existed precisely as many insects as needed to fill all these nets. The slanting rays of the Moon slice the air between the trees with a linear fractal of shifting light and shadow: a broad stripe, within it a narrow one, within that a multitude of still narrower ones; as if someone sat and persistently cut a shimmering fabric. Cut and cut, and yet lost no composure—all lines strictly parallel, without a single flaw. Underfoot—not grass and stones, but an elegant polka-dot pattern laid out by sparse, unseasonably fallen small yellow leaves. Fog creeps along the very surface of the soil, so that Armoor became lost in sensation—was it the softness of the light-grey smooth stone, or after all tiny puffs of cold vapor. He saw a non-existent reflection of the sky in the colors of the grass: fireflies in an inverted ocean above; glints of dew drops on the tiny blossoms of the grass below. As if it were a deliberate resemblance… Armoor slept.

In the morning, early russet light pours from the sky of Avertigus. He has been walking for a second hour along a wide path—a human path—that climbs perceptibly upward. His way lies toward the lake. The path becomes a road. Flocks of sheep now and then block his way. He does not slow, however, each time skirting them along the verge. In truth, the verges differ from the roadbed only slightly. Two strips freed of short grass constantly bifurcate, only to merge again several dozen paces later. To oscillate relative to the general direction—such is the method of travel here. Armoor is a ritualist at heart. Such observations greatly occupy him. He finds the deviation from the rule in such an overt form remarkable. He is particularly amused by the impunity: "strayed from the path? No matter, fall back onto the course, dear traveler." Armoor fancies that this is an additional sense organ of his. He is a routinist. He notices such manifestations of reality upon demand by a specially born stimulus in his consciousness. Just as, while staring at grass, a person does not note individual blades—their chiliads—only until a tree suddenly drops a bead of recent rain. Then the person immediately pays attention to that very blade which suffered the fall. One deviation from the norm, of the needed and expected type, and the mind is right there: signaling attention.

Yet even for the armorer, the ascent to the coastal ridge of hills was no easy task. Now he walks downward, and the physical relief in his legs transmits itself to his entire consciousness. It will be easier from here on. Clarity will come. The set-

tlement that appeared on the shore already radiates laxity from afar. Simple architecture without a shadow of a need for defense. Eternal late spring and summer—in the carelessness of the roof structures. People, people. Boats, boats, boats. Stillness. Even the overhanging ashen clouds, borne from sites of a recent volcanic soot discharge, lend the landscape not gloom, but a self-assured graphite efficiency.

Seeing upon a roadside post the large inscription "Haven of the Pale Wyrm Rider," he enters confidently. What will he do in the society of sectarians? He will teach the children, for he is a bearer of knowledge new to these parts. What else?

His pantaloons billow in the wind with all their splendor. At last, he shall be able to cultivate plants in the warm air. Ever-warm air. And the earth demanded seed, that it might return it a hundredfold.

¶

Fragment 34. Armoor's Performance

¶

Women. Many women. All in near identical white caps. Long skirts. Deep burgundy, black, dark blue, pine green. Blouses of every possible color and pattern. Children. Many children. Oaks, maples, chestnuts—all whitewashed from the roots up to half a man's height. Roads of densely packed crushed stone. Low white fences: meant to guide livestock returning from pasture, not to shield from prying eyes or, much less, ill intent. On the whole, not noisy. No foul smells. Men in black trousers with suspenders and straw hats with flat brims. Shirts white, gray, or cornflower blue. Occasionally one spots garrison folk in hoods. Mentor Armoor chose not to exchange his splendid attire for the local dress. He understood the need to respect the customs of the place where one had taken root, but his passion for beauty had not melted away either.

He walked from the school, where he had left his pupils with an assistant, toward the workshops situated at the edge of a flat-topped hill. In his hand—a fishing rod. At his belt—an empty scabbard. He had been in the Haven for a month now, yet had not found the occasion to set his rapier to rights.

"I shall make use of the vise, Boar?" Armoor addressed the smith and greeted him with the local handshake. "What keeps you busy today?"

"Tightening the axles of a carriage," Boar smiled warmly. "How fares thy pumpkin, dear Armoor?"

"The little pumpkin lives," Armoor recounted, with all due care dismounting the rapier from the rod. "The thirtieth day; any day now the explosive growth of mass will commence. The phase of latent heat is concluded. To the eye, the pumpkin scarcely grows at all, but within, you know, a colossal restructuring is underway."

He unhurriedly finished his work, and the rapier found its place where it belonged—in the scabbard.

"Aye… and what carriage is that?" the former armorer asked belatedly, with feigned surprise. He suspected, of course, what carriage it might be. "Are there

coachmakers hereabouts? I've seen naught but wagons in the Haven. There's not a single road leading up from the lowlands. Delivered by water?"

"A carriage, precisely! And of a most rare type at that. An ancient Arganorian construction of the 'kola' type," Boar stressed the unfamiliar word on the final syllable. "Came under its own power. Care to see how? Mark you: functionally, it is a hearse."

"By all means," Mentor Armoor's barely contained excitement over his impending rendezvous warred with his indifference to carriages in general and to this carriage in particular.

Merely out of courtesy he followed Boar to the back yard, yet the carriage shattered his apathy. Panels fitted with improbable precision, of exceptional smoothness—worthy of note. But the chief marvel—the wheels. Or rather, their absence. The carriage rested upon four triangular rollers, as though several gigantic fat caterpillars had been coiled into three-edged cylinders, with small but sturdy wheels set at the corners.

"I see it now," said Armoor, inspecting the rollers. "Such contrivances have no need of roads."

"Let us say: roads and the absence of roads prove not to be mutually exclusive," Boar pointed to the rollers. "A most clever design. It gleams like copper."

"But it is not copper," the school mentor half-asked, half-stated. "I must be off, Boar. Time to return to my pupils. Whose carriage is it, anyway?"

"Why, they went off toward your very school. I know not who they are. They said they've come to see a children's play. Someone from the rector's chancellery is guiding them. Showing them the Haven. Important guests. Though, all guests here are important; every guest is a rarity."

Armoor made for the exit, but Boar stayed him:

"Lift it by the corner," he suggested.

"You jest," Armoor's brow replied, but the smith's gaze insisted.

Armoor grasped the lower edge…

"Well now," he murmured in bewilderment a few moments later, lowering the carriage.

"Three or four men's weight lighter than ordinary," Boar gave the school mentor another insistent look. "That should not be. Take care with those guests, brother."

⁂

Armoor did not hurry. The play would not begin without him. After all, who was the director? He.

To either side lay small allotment fields and houses with kitchen gardens. Fences of two horizontal rails. A fence made for a comfortable seat, though not intended for such. A group of youths, two lads, three lasses. Postures lacking in religious modesty. Attire not festive, somewhat dandified. One young fellow stood whistling, propped against the fence. Another sat perched upon it like a cockerel. In hats. Black, elegant hats. Armoor was not indifferent to hats. 'I need a new hat,' he recalled for the umpteenth time. The girls were more demure. But! One had both hands upon her hips. Another cast a beckoning glance from beneath her brow. Vice lived. But it thrashed within a cage. How often the skill of silence proves the pinnacle of thought.

'How do they believe in that which no one else in the world believes?' one part of Armoor's consciousness asked another. 'How do tiny religious movements survive? If the faith is continental, it is no marvel. But thus…'

And the second part of his consciousness answered:

'Truly believe in the stated dogma only those who hold that truth is seen solely by the folk within their monastery or village.'

'The law is simple: if one is broader than the second in scope, it is necessarily poorer in content,' continued a third part of his consciousness the dialogue.

"The Universe provide for You," the young men nodded to him as he passed. "Good day to you."

'Verily,' thought Armoor, smiling at the lads. He was not obliged to answer. Not because he was an outsider. Simply not obliged.

⁂

¶ Long lived the happy Sixreach, and no one ever spoke false.

¶ And each had a pair, and each pair had a mentor, and each pair dwelt in concord.

¶ And none could know more than all did know.

¶ And Sixreach was ruled by three happy wedded couples—three Great husbands and three Great wives. For three is the perfect number.

¶ And the six rulers held sway over six Great rivers and six fertile valleys between them.

¶ And in each valley grew unique plants, and in each river swam unique fish.

¶ Many centuries they traded among themselves, knowing no sorrow.

While the first act of the performance unfolded on stage, Armoor spotted Aris among the spectators and began making his way toward him through the rows of chairs. Armoor had never spoken with the charron, yet recognizing him proved, of course, no difficulty. It seemed to the mentor that his strange hunchfront was not so dreadful as common rumor insisted.

"I have your rapier," Armoor patted his own thigh, seating himself beside Aris. "I am Virgilia's father, Armoor."

"Thank you," the charron smiled. A flicker of surprise crossed his eyes, but judging by the gaze that read the numerous details of his interlocutor's attire, it was not occasioned by the latter's belonging to high society. Though it was most logical to ascribe Aris's bewilderment to the inexplicability of how Armoor had managed so swiftly to ascend so high upon the Great mountain and survive.

"I shall convey it to the grotto on the shore," Aris replied to the point. And at once he offered: "Perhaps thou wouldst take this labor upon thyself? The First Rulers are already there. Lay it where and how thou deemest fit."

"Nay, my thanks to thee," the former armorer declined. "I am done with armorial matters. I now cultivate warmth-loving plants. Or rather, one plant. Simply place her in the grotto—that, I think, will suffice."

"Well and good. That is just. She hung… she cast this weapon to me, not to another."

Armoor began to unfasten the scabbard from his belt.

"Hold, hold! Not here!" Aris stopped him. "I must say: thou, esteemed Armoor, art not like to slip free of trouble with weapons."

"Very well, I shall hand it over at the exit. What manner of trouble?"

"Whilst we were encamped… some sennight's journey hence, for the sake of acclimating to the altitude, thou knowest… we contrived to send forth and receive

back a brace of pigeons we acquired in the last village upon our path. Thy daughter hath set the transparent steel blades into mass production."

"Wherefore?" Armoor sought to conceal his vexation.

"That I know not. But the blades are given freely to all men. Yet let us hearken to the play, if thou hast no objection?"

The scenery on stage had changed.

¶ But there crept into Sixreach a wyrm that did fabricate.

¶ And therefore it seemed he knew more than others.

¶ And some desired, after his fashion, to know more.

¶ And they too began to fabricate—and lusted to deceive.

¶ But Sixreach rejected such with all its being, and the folk believed them not.

¶ And the deceivers then sought to sail away beyond the sea-ocean.

¶ But they could not—the sea currents shattered their ships to splinters.

"I saw your carriage, the kola. Remarkable engineering," said Armoor as soon as the pause for a change of scenery permitted.

"To my mind, 'twere better to sit and wait somewhere in a hidden cellar until Avertigus himself comes to his senses, and the folk with him, than to be jolted over stones upon the endless slope of the Great mountain. I bear no kind feelings toward this hearse, though it hath saved our lives. Card-Panso holds that the body is fashioned of spider silk."

"How have you gotten on with him? I know his parents."

"Not ill. Tell me, art thou the author of this piece?" Aris asked bluntly.

"I and the library of the Haven," Armoor replied modestly.

"What wyrm is this? From whence crept he?"

"From the former world. He ever does so. Thus say the local myths."

Suddenly, red lanterns began to glow upon the stage.

¶ And then they began to gouge the mountaintop, that they might cast stone vessels from the outpouring hot blood of the continent.

¶ And they succeeded—they began to cast vessel after vessel in a single mold of stout steel.

¶ And they began to launch them upon the water of the caldera lake, to float them down the river to the sea, that they might cross the ocean in them.

¶ And the vessels sailed away across the ocean, and their boarding was thus: speak false and step aboard for it.

¶ Never did they return to tell what lay beyond the ocean.

¶ And still some fled, knowing not whither they sailed nor wherefore.

¶ But the Great mountain could not endure the wounds dealt it—it suffered from the blood sucked forth.

¶ And Sixreach began to crumble. The Great mountain began to crack and burst asunder.

"Did it truly happen so?" asked Aris.

"How should I know?" Armoor whispered in reply. "This episode hath a plausible ring to it. Poke a hole in a barrel—it shall leak. Torment the vessel further—it shall fall to pieces."

"Mayhap 'tis all a metaphor?" Aris conjectured. "A sort of defiance of fate."

"That may be allowed. In the myths there is the phrase 'Let not my will be—pray.' There it soundeth as disappointment. Ancient texts cannot be interpreted unambiguously—the tongue hath changed. On the other hand, that world is no more. And ours is here. Therefore, something truly did break quite physically, without allegory."

"Thou speakest sooth," Aris returned his gaze to the performance.

¶ And one of the three Great wives grew deaf from the thunder and dumb.

¶ And the six rulers too desired to depart for the new continent, that they might survive.

¶ But the deaf-mute wife, who could not speak false, could not board.

¶ And then the world beheld that the spurned deaf-mute wife had conceived by a beam of the Moon ere the mountain and the world burst asunder.

¶ And in her womb were two twins.

¶ And the wife wrought it so that they three became—as before—one pair and one mentor, that the old order might be preserved.

¶ And the wife then received a firm body and great might.

¶ And she understood, and all understood, that there was no land beyond the ocean.

¶ And the stone vessels perished farther from the shore than ordinary ones, and none beheld them there.

The schoolchildren bustled about on stage, shifting the scenery.

"Prithrea is not deaf at all," said Aris with undue sharpness.

"Now that is precisely allegory. But not mine own. That is all in the books."

"And what of the stone vessels?"

"A thing most real. I saw them myself in youth."

"Thou sayest so!" Aris marveled.

"And thou mayest see them too, if thou hast half a year to spare for a journey afoot: a pair of wrecks lie in the upper reaches of Impassable Brook. In fragments. A thing as useless as it is real."

The scenery and lighting shifted completely. Now all was green and blue.

¶ And she then turned into a sea-horse from great sorrow and love.

¶ And she named herself—Wyrm Rider, that she might be the steed to flay the wyrm.

¶ And she befriended a sea star with five rays.

¶ And she besought the star to aid her, and the star consented.

¶ The star taught the land, which was symmetrical as a reflection in a mirror with its original, a singular trick.

¶ The land turned itself inside out and lost its symmetry—becoming, like the star, symmetrical about an axis, with rays.

¶ And the sea-horse, with her horse-draft, bore the five rulers and all the folk to the new land.

¶ And she lost all memory from this and became all bloodless and pale.

A meaningful pause fell over the performance. The company of musicians changed.

"What madness is this?" asked Aris. "Wherefore change the musicians?"

"The local epic deals very closely with insults," Armoor explained. "They mock—in a wholly vulgar sense—Pentareach itself. They call it arse-mouthed."

"Whhat?" the charron gaped.

"Precisely. It is plain that the mountain ranges of the continent resemble a sea star upon the map. In this, the theologians hereabout find—derision."

"Of whom by whom?"

"Therein lies the chief question, to which there is no answer. The insult lies in that Avertigus's symmetry is axial. The mountains and valleys—like a sea star, thus radial. Almost axial. But the symmetry of men—'tis as in a mirror. Flat. And that of living elementals, visible only in a minikin glass, is the same. They are born so, in truth. They halve themselves. But the continent's symmetry is other. The world's is other. How can that be?"

"I see no sense in this as yet."

"The star standeth somewhere betwixt the elementals and ourselves. Yet it is different. In the deep sense of surfaces and spaces—different."

"Well, and what of it?"

"This: that upon that path, it was forced to turn itself inside out. Else it could not change its kind of symmetry."

"And again—'what of it'?!"

"When thou turnest thyself inside out, thy hind hole becometh thy fore hole. And the reverse. That is what."

"Diligent Forebears!"

"And dost thou think it was easy for me to wait here for you all, alone with this rapier?"

The performance continued.

¶ And the common folk began to live, yet not as before, but in a feeble semblance of ancient harmony.

¶ And the bodies of the rulers fell into eternal sleep, lest they witness the debauch of morals.

¶ Yet the spirit of each ruler lived on in common folk, passed down within a Line from generation to generation.

¶ And there remained five rivers upon the land, and there was found no valley nor river for the wife deafened by lies, who alone remained conscious.

¶ And she began to dig the earth in despair, striving to excavate a sixth valley.

¶ And she failed.

All the while the scenery was changed, the two men kept silence.

¶ Then she prayed in mute despair—to whom she knew not, with what plea she knew not.

¶ And she slew one of her own children, to do away with the role of mentor.

¶ And she found a hero in whom dwelt the spirit of one of the rulers, yet not of her former husband.

¶ And she besought the hero to bring the bodies of the five once more to the maw of the Great mountain, that they might be wakened there by the breath of the hot earth.

¶ And the hero consented, and he bore the bodies of the five in a black carriage.

¶ And he began to dance upon the roof of his flying carriage, scorning all danger, that he might discomfit his foes.

¶ And they met at the summit of the Great mountain with transparent blades in hand.

¶ And they besought the world that it mend itself and set all to rights.

¶ Yet they knew no longer—what was set to rights?

¶ But the world consented.

¶ And it became as it was set to rights.

The curtain fell.

"And this is in the books?" Aris asked gloomily, with a hint of unfriendliness.

"That too, my friend. That too. Save for the dance upon the carriage, true. That is my directorial vision."

"Where then is my transparent blade?"

"Perchance the transparency should be understood allegorically—it rendereth war more honest."

"In what wise?"

"By eliminating friction. Black steel, dark forest, hidden motive—all this createth the friction of uncertainty. Thou spendest time on reconnaissance, on fear, on conjecture. The transparent blade doth away with this friction," Armoor elucidated. "Well now… For today, I think I shall take my leave. I must look in upon my pumpkin. We shall see one another come morning."

¶

Fragment 35. Phase Transition

¶

Aris stepped out of the school and sat down right there on the high earthen bank. The building of the educational institution—a solid, large, single-story parallelepiped plastered white—propped up his back and directed his gaze across the axis of Avertigus. Far along the curve of the Great Cylinder, past the precipice of the hilly plateau upon which Haven was situated, he could see the rapid-strewn River in its upper reaches. Farther on, in a light haze of cloud, he saw mountain ridges and the River winding among them in its middle reaches. Still farther—many, many days' journey from here—flowed the River in its middle-lower course. That region, impossibly remote, was almost invisible now, yet its major landmarks could be discerned, bolstered by a dense knowledge of the world map. Though the lower reaches were utterly unseen—today was not one of those rare days when the clouds obligingly parted for hundreds of leagues—even the territories of the River's delta could be felt from here. No longer by sight, but by an acknowledgment that they were there. Nevertheless, the invisible presence of the delta in the landscape rendered the picture of the world whole.

A terrible, viscous fatigue settled over Aris. No wonder: there hadn't been a free minute in the first half of the day. He drew the rapier from the scabbard of the optician Jinngo and inserted it back into place—along his spine. Prithrea's scabbard, even empty, remained an invariable part of his attire. The broken tip of the clock hand from the flooded town hall somehow lent Aris confidence.

The moment the rapier touched his back, the day's events flashed before his eyes anew. The click of the weapon seating into its grooves seemed to engage layers of memory, like the steps of the colossal landscape before him.

Aris fixed his gaze where the seaport ought to be, in the unimaginable distance. The very act of looking poured a retrospective into him. "When they descended the hill toward Haven, they were already expected. The people who met the carriage had obviously been alerted by lookouts who had spotted the travelers while they were still on the ridge's crest. 'Logical for an ordinary settlement with defensive works,' thought the charron, 'but strange here, in a village without even a rudimentary palisade, considering that we ourselves reached Haven not knowing

the way and in the absence of roads for most of the journey.' To describe the situation accurately, half the travelers—two out of four—had not been certain of Haven's very existence until the first trails appeared near the lake. It followed that observation was maintained around the clock. Of course, this was later explained by the presence here of Virgilia's father, a fact which itself requires explanation."

One couldn't say this vision differed radically from a simple recollection, but Aris mechanically withdrew and re-sheathed the rapier, producing that characteristic click. He suddenly saw in the pictures of memory the grotto in the cliff they had visited that morning. A dozen guardsmen carrying the bodies of the Forebears. As he did so, Aris was looking at the very edge of the plateau overgrown with rusty grass, on whose opposite, lakeside brink he now found himself. Another click.

Aris shifted his gaze again into the distance, to a plane of the grand scenery one step closer than the port's supposed location. This spot was merely hinted at in the mountain folds, yet it was far more visually tangible than the port, which was entirely invisible from here. This afforded Aris a retrospective one step later: "Be that as it may, these people, the stewards, did not properly introduce themselves; they instantly took charge of the guests, merely informing them that a program for their stay had been devised. But first, they said, the bodies of the Forebears must be placed in the grotto. How they knew of the bodies, Aris did not bother to ask. Partly out of high-altitude apathy, partly out of caution. Indeed, as the charron's further observations showed, a peculiar system of governance was in effect at Haven. He had never encountered anything like it. No one seemed to infringe upon him personally in any overt way. Yet he felt, if not a noose around his neck, then the firm grips of two bruisers on both his shoulders. The use of formal speech appeared not to have crossed these people's minds. The charron would not have been surprised if they knew nothing of it at all."

And again he repeated his exercise, shifting his attentive gaze one "scenery" layer of the world closer to himself. No rapier click was required, as he had just determined experimentally: "The pterodactyl, which during the journey had for some reason attached itself solely to Haakon, was separated from the former priest without ceremony and placed in a special enclosure. The reptile was monstrously exhausted. The Judge and the priest had more than once engaged in learned discourse along the way about how the creature managed to fly in the thin air, and found no explanation except that the travelers themselves grew thinner as the carriage gained altitude above sea level. Haakon was asked to

move from the driver's box inside the carriage. A pair of highland horses was harnessed. This was done in haste, which likewise defied explanation—if the bodies could… if one may so express it—spoil, then it was too late to hurry. So mused Aris."

The charron acquired a taste for it. He shifted his gaze of presence ever closer along the inner wall of the titanic cylinder. Memory obligingly supplied a detailed picture of recent events: "Regardless of the charron's thoughts, having handed the carriage passengers a basket of provisions, the stewards sent their own driver to the box. They set off immediately. Five mounted guardsmen escorted ahead and five behind. And again the charron marveled: what was the point of such a numerous cortege? If the catafalque had not yet fallen prey to banditry in the wild lands, was there cause for such fear in the immediate vicinity of Haven? The grotto proved to be a half-hour's ride away—on the lake shore, but high above the waterline, in the cliff face. An awkward staircase cut into the stone led upward. This explained the size of the escort. The travelers were not invited into the grotto. In truth, none of them were eager to enter. The bodies, along with thick mats of moss, were carried by the guardsmen themselves, who had dismounted. Two men to a body. Without stretchers. It looked not at all solemn. There was no supervisor with them. At least, no one gave orders. There was no one to reproach."

Now Aris was examining the very footpath winding over the hills in the foreground of the world's stage: "Upon their return to the village, the travelers were met at the guest house. Those who met them introduced themselves simply: 'We are from the Chancellery.' They provided a room for each, warning that a tour program of Haven would commence in half an hour. They unloaded all the luggage from the carriage themselves and placed it by the porch. Two representatives of the Chancellery faltered slightly when hauling Prithrea's heavy barrel organ, but gave no sign of it. The arrivals were shown the refectory and fed well there. Then they were led to the Chancellery, shown the infirmary, the library, and also taken along the main street, where all necessary services were found. Coins of Illumiros and Maristea proved to be in common use. Logical, given the location."

The subsequent recollection fit entirely within the bounds of ordinary memory: "At some point, the carriage was taken away to the workshops, with word that it needed repairs, and without consulting the owners' opinion. For that matter, the travelers themselves did not know which of them owned the carriage. After all this, they were escorted to the school for a performance."

⁂

And so, finally, Aris and Haakon were walking from the school building to their new chambers. The Judge and Card-Panso had departed immediately after the play's conclusion, without saying where.

Here, at the very top of the world, the charron began to see things more clearly. More distinctly. He partly "blamed"—in a good sense—the rapier that had been returned to him. Furthermore, the air was more transparent and infinitely fresher. Aris, like any denizen of the continent of Pentareach—except those wretches whom extreme poverty had deprived of a normal childhood—had been to the sea as a schoolboy, on group excursions. But it was cold there. For half the year, in winter, a mere half-hour's sail from the river deltas, the sea was bound fast by ice. Here, however—eternal warmth. The warm air of Avertigus's sky strives upward. Owing to the air's scantiness, the vegetation remained austere and economical, not at all like in the conservatories near the great cities. Aris was tormented by a desire to find a way to "coax" his body into acclimatizing, so he might remain here forever.

Haven could not be called a city. It was a large settlement. Nonetheless, the significant scale of the place prompted one to wonder how it had come to pass that practically no one below knew of this place. Perhaps there were other inhabited spots on Caldera Lake? The lake was immense. The size of its blotch on the map was known to all. Everyone knew it was the largest lake in Pentareach. But seeing it firsthand was staggering. Perhaps this sensation was created by the water's unusual turquoise hue.

The guest house stood not merely on the shore—the two-story building with a two-story mansard roof rested upon a broad stone outcropping. It could be called an enormous pier. There were no large vessels here, only boats and fishing schooners built for five fishermen, no more. Haakon and Aris were assigned chambers on the first floor, which had sunk into the earth a hundred years prior. This suggested that large waves did not occur here.

The lower sill of the window was at head height. Through the open vent, the size of a church folio, drifted incense smoke. Such was the custom here. They seated themselves on massive chairs upholstered in burgundy velvet at a large table. Upon the wall, an elegant clock ticked peacefully. Every half-hour, a wooden cuckoo no doubt announced the day's passing. Overhead hung a large model of a brig, both masts and all twenty cannon executed with a care worthy of a better purpose. The suspension employed a block, so the height could be adjusted by

winding the cord around a special hook in the wall. What had it cost to deliver such items here by water, Aris wondered.

The almost basement-level situation of the room bestowed upon the exhausted travelers the coolness so needed on such a day. Both remained shod, for the wooden floor was both cool and splintery.

"I've been stuck like a shaft into a stranger's yoke!" Haakon did not so much say as hawked out. His silver-steel curls swayed.

"I'd like to reassure you, but the matter might be even worse," answered Aris. "What if our bodies…"

"Bodies be damned!" interrupted Haakon. "Our spirit!"

"…are being used so that foreign shafts might be stuck into them, and only then —us into a foreign yoke?"

"This… pictacle."

"Spectacle, Haakon. Spectacle."

"I am no young man, I can hear what matters. 'And the heirs shall convene'— that's what they got in there? They'll kill us here, Aris. Sure as fate. And pin us atop those half-corpses."

"Quiet, quiet," Aris covered the old man's mouth with his palm. "Let's go down to the beach instead."

They went outside. The stone pier was crowded. People were busy with their boats. Aris, naturally, drew attention. But the beach offered only enormous boulders, scattered here and there across the strip of sand.

"Armoor, the father-in-law of optician Jinngo," said Aris, "developed a twitch in his eye from vexation when I told him that Virgilia was mass-producing swords of transparent steel."

"And you didn't tell him that two wars had begun?"

"I remained silent about that possible interpretation of events," Aris admitted.

"Card-Panso is telling him right now, fret not," Haakon jabbed. "What's he doing here?"

"The surface reason: he was suddenly eager to deliver Prithrea's rapier to me," the charron offered the formal justification.

"What for? Maybe he coated it with a slow poison?" Haakon proposed his theory for discussion. "Think, Aris: why does anyone slip somethin' to somebody?"

"If one considers the very root of things, it is so that the object remains close to the one to whom you gave it," Aris drew an elementary conclusion.

"So… the notion he's a friend—we discard that. If that were so, nothin' would happen anyway," Haakon began to reason aloud. "Let's say he's an enemy. Why keep it close? Why for? Then this object must either help you do yourself some foul turn, or hinder you from doin' yourself some good. You might manage some mischief on your own; the rapier's no help there. Is it hinderin' you?"

"Who?" Aris did not catch the drift.

"The rapier—is it hinderin'?" Haakon repeated.

"Hmm… Well, I don't know, my dear Haakon. Maybe it is. If it hinders, it does so cunningly."

"Cunningly…" the former priest pondered, "cunningly. She's a cunning one… I've got it! She's watchin' you."

"What's there to watch me for, Haakon? She's hangin' on my back, plain as day."

The old man attempted to clamber onto one of the black-gray stones but slipped off. Then he backed away, took a run at it, and thus managed to leap onto the smooth boulder.

"Then I don't know," Haakon conceded. "Somethin' foul's afoot, that's plain. Lured us here by deceit. They call Prithrea a queen who had a whole country taken from her…"

"Because she saved the entire rest of the world," Aris grimly concurred. "I want to sleep—I'm spent. Let's go, Haakon."

⁂

The next morning, the charron took to his bed with a fever. The rapier was with him, under the bed. The day before, Armoor had delivered it from hand to hand. Haakon the Good tended to the charron. Aris's fevered consciousness desired to see no one else. For the first three days of his illness, he scarcely uttered a couple of coherent sentences.

"Thought the dance would spare me illness," he said on the fourth day. "My chest even straightened out a bit."

"Now, now," Haakon soothed him.

"So your day never came after all?"

"Not a chance, master," Haakon replied.

And Aris slept. Then raved. Then slept again.

Haakon spoke to him, sitting by the bedside:

"Card-Panso let slip out there, in the over-fresh air, that he'd been watchin' Prithrea for a long time—as part of his main duties in the secret police. She, not bein' a fool, began watchin' Card-Panso in return. And it turns out it was she who pointed him to you as the 'heir.' He jokes that he himself asked Avertigus Coriole to divert your shot."

Haakon wandered the room. Sometimes aimlessly, sometimes bustling about with purpose. Often he would leave altogether.

"And what of the whirlpool in the bath, you'll ask," Haakon went on. "Well, what of a whirlpool? Who's to say how a drain's been rigged. Besides, many know that sometimes a simple prayer's enough. We often see a game board where someone's just knocked over the pieces, I reckon. What do you think yourself, master Aris?"

The charron did not answer.

Aris understood that the rector of Haven himself had visited him.

"What's your name?" Aris greeted the rector with this question. And at that, his strength nearly gave out.

"My name? Just the rector. I don't really have a name as such," said the visitor. "I'm an NPC, formally speaking. My twin brother had a name, but for me—there's no need."

"Why am I here?" Aris asked.

"I can suppose," answered the rector, "that Avertigus requires true consciousness. We are interested in the manifestations of the sparklette brethren's movement within metals."

"And what do I have to do with it?"

"You were supposed to bring the transparent swords."

"What for?"

"Consciousness is born only when there is something within you inseparable from the world. A firm body. It needs a body."

"The swords are the body?" asked Aris.

"A sword is an extension of hand and will. All men, holding transparent steel swords with will—that is already a body. Almost."

"What's the 'almost'?"

"The men must fight, so that he may feel the body."

"Fight whom?"

"Himself."

"Among themselves?" asked Aris.

"That too," answered the rector with a sigh.

"What is in these swords?"

"That's what I should be asking you."

"Jinngo made them."

"And where is Jinngo?"

"I don't know."

"Once you're firmly certain where he is—then things will be well," said the rector.

"What's so good about that? Firmly, firmly—you keep harpin' on that. And he won't manage it anyway. They're brittle, those swords."

"No, you're wrong. You were right to ask the optician Jinngo. A very fortunate choice. And what appears to be the fragility of glass… well, your intuition deceives you there. It possesses the hardness of steel. And his airiness is a pretense. He's liquid, in truth, just like his wife."

"I know nothing of liquids."

"Then read 'Hydrodynamics.' We have it in the library. Well, be well—get better."

And again Haakon sat by the charron's bedside and comforted him:

"Prithrea's body grew mighty firm, I'll grant you, master. This business has calloused you up somethin' fierce too. Needs a bit of moisture to thin it out, eh?"

And Haakon mused how good it was that Aris wasn't thinking while Haakon talked. Good that he didn't notice the length of the pauses between Haakon's words, because in those empty spaces he wasn't thinking at all. And not thinking at all was very beneficial, for thinking consumes the world's will. And the world's will, he said, is not boundless. If you think, you remember less, and if you remember more, you end up thinking less. How else could it be?

"Ah me," Haakon intoned on another occasion, "everything's moved by the will of great men, they say. Nonsense, of course. By the accumulation of petty follies and accidents, endless accumulation without cease. That's how it all..."

"Best you not talk to anyone here, master. A conspiracy—oh, it's wearisome, master," Haakon complained another evening. "Talk and... connivance... wearisome for most. Like the air up here."

And indeed, the illness ran a severe course. When he finally rose to his feet, about a fortnight later, it became clear that a swift return below could not be avoided. One had to be born here to earn the right to live here.

On the other hand, Aris felt he had almost grasped why Prithrea had requested the making of transparent swords. And why she hadn't said so herself.

⁂

At last, a day and hour arrived when Aris felt himself recovered.

He washed himself thoroughly.

"What do I want?" he asked himself, looking in the mirror. "What am I here for? What is the cause of my being here?"

"Which of these three questions is the most important?" answered the homely, kind, and haggard face in the glass with another question. "I think: the first one. Care for a hint, you ham-fisted archer with the crooked mug? Or dare you confess it yourself?"

"Prithrea..." whispered Aris, turning away from the mirror.

"Just so," grumbled the mirror. "And if there's nothing and no one truly existing in the world for you to dream of, then at least trouble yourself to observe the proprieties. Did they bring you the rapier? They did. Go thank him as is fitting and propose a joint ritual at the grotto. The man took pains, hurried. While you're at it, by the by, sniff out why he couldn't sit at home, on Chancellery rations."

Aris dressed, sat at the table, and ate a large piece of bread with milk. The reflection in the mug was far hazier than in the mirror, so he grew bold and advanced a daring thesis:

"And what if Coriole's temporary disappearance truly holds cosmic significance?"

"What's it to you?"—disdaining the difficulties of reflection in milk, the mug's mug remained full of skepticism.

"It creates a strange and unpleasant duality," Aris pondered whether to spit in his interlocutor's face, that is, into his own mug, or not. On the one hand, saliva was already in his oral cavity—what difference did it make if it reached his throat via a stop in the mug? On the other hand, something held him back. Concluding that the illness had perhaps not entirely released him, he decided to restrict himself to developing the thesis: "Either the world is not real, since Coriole is snuffed and lit like a candle in a drafty vestibule. Or it is so real that it can flout even its own rules."

"You find yourself deceived?" the reflection ceased its mockery.

"In a manner of speaking," said Aris.

"Go see Armoor, since you're set on it," concluded the pale visage at the bottom of the mug, which now held almost no milk. "The Judge and Card-Panso have grown more wearisome than bitter radish. Even during the ascent. Haakon needs a rest from you. It's not as if you can go to the rector. It would be awkward. Do you even remember what you spoke with him about?"

"Barely," Aris admitted.

"First determine whether you have a chance of staying here, in the medical sense."

"And how?"

"Find out all you can regarding the physiology of existing at such an altitude. From Armoor. There's a library here, he mentioned. Look for information there."

"And the rector?" asked Aris.

"As a last resort. What if he offers you some service right away—then you'd have a medical basis for answering, at least."

Aris drank the last drops, set the mug on the table, and went outside, swaying slightly.

¶

Fragment 36. The Softness of Strawberry Heaths

¶

As he stepped out of the guest-house chambers on the embankment, the charron collided with a man right on the threshold. It proved to be a postal courier. Without a word, the man gently nudged Aris back inside. The courier himself was propelled forward by a spring affixed to the upper part of the door.

He drew a small packet from his pocket and shook it, producing a pleasant rustle. Would you believe it, Aris marveled, he has brought roasted coffee beans. Nothing could be more timely. A coffee grinder was found in the guest house. Taking turns at the mill for several minutes, they brewed fresh coffee. They splashed the remaining milk into it. And it was good. The coffee was good.

The courier left a stout envelope on the table, announced that one could now depart, and then took himself off. Aris opened the envelope and discovered a book within. The book was blue, small, and tightly bound. The back cover bore nothing. On the front, a single word in embossed gold lettering: "Hydrodynamics." The endpaper carried the stamp of Haven's library, over which was superimposed a tiny seal reading "Discontinued" and the inscription "teacher's shelf."

Aris returned the book to the envelope and concealed it inside Prithrea's barrel organ. He went outside again—this time unimpeded. The spring swallowed the sound of its own tension and closed the door behind him.

⁂

Armoor's house and garden lay at the very edge of the settlement, far from the lake shore. Logical enough: he had only recently arrived. Aris had to cross the village, which bustled with its morning affairs. Lengthwise or crosswise—depending on which direction one considered which. No one paid the charron any mind.

As it turned out, the outermost streets afforded a fine view of the hillside where an enormous stone mosaic had been laid—a hundred to a hundred and fifty paces across. It was a portrait of a white-bearded old man in a curious frock coat. The coloring of the stones was chosen most artfully—Aris had never seen any-

thing like it. Beneath the image was an inscription, also formed of large smooth boulders: "Count NN."

The unfamiliar mirror-image letters prompted the charron to consider that when he visited the library he ought to check whether other books on hydrodynamics existed. Moreover, he reflected, it was important to check not only on the "H" shelf but also on the shelf labeled with the inverted letter "L." One never knew how a book might have been shelved, Aris reasoned.

He did not begrudge the effort and walked a considerable distance up the hill in order to grasp the size of the stones employed in constructing the image of the bearded count. Imagine his surprise when it emerged that his infallible charron-archer's eye had this time deceived him. The portrait was larger and farther away by at least one-fifth than he had initially supposed.

Aris stood bewildered beside a boulder as tall as himself when a boy appeared out of nowhere beside him. Seven or eight years old. He was neatly dressed, but, as the charron thought, excessively pragmatic for such a small person—he wore a doublet with numerous pockets and pouchlets, as well as a broad leather belt with fastenings. Nothing, however, was attached to them.

"Mister, was it you dancing on the carriage roof?"

"It was."

"Tell me."

Aris clicked his rapier and began to recount to the boy:

"When the cannon boomed… Do you know what a cannon is?"

"I know everything about artillery," the lad did not falter.

"…I felt vertigo then. I decided it would do well to cover those who had fired with choice oaths. And to make myself better heard, I climbed onto the carriage roof."

"And why did you shout toward the forest as well?" asked the boy.

"Have you ever tried standing on the roof of a moving carriage?"

"Nuh-uh," the boy replied, gazing at the hunchfront with admiration.

"But you own a top? Such a toy."

"Of course," the boy said with dignity.

"You've noticed that while it spins it stays upright?"

"You're like Avertigus!" the lad exclaimed, now with undisguised adoration. "Where are you going? Let me show you the shortest way."

"If you please," Aris accepted the offer with pleasure. "I need to go to Armoor's garden."

They walked along some overgrown back ways, and the corners of low brick fences repeatedly compelled them to change direction at right angles. A couple of times their path was blocked by rickety gates. These, however, proved unlocked, permitting Aris and his guide to cross someone's abandoned plots. Very soon they emerged onto a regular street and, having passed a couple of homesteads, found themselves before Armoor's house.

⁂

Armoor met Aris at the gate, having spotted the guests from afar. The charron noted to himself once again that the common saying "from rags to riches" had some foundation. Hardly a year had passed since Armoor had joined the high aristocracy, yet he was dressed as though for a diplomatic reception.

They entered the garden. The boy showed no intention of going about his own business.

It was impossible to pass by the pumpkin. The pumpkin of the former armorer Armoor proved staggering.

"Is this your pumpkin?" Aris stared in the utmost astonishment at the monster the size of a wine cask. "How is this possible?!"

"I feed it by force," Armoor replied.

"Why, Diligent Forebears?!" Aris could not comprehend.

"Ah, but my dear Aris. It allows one to feel the evenness of time."

"And simply sitting on an earthen bank—for the evenness of time—would that not be simpler?"

"Time—it comes in chunks. Like gazing at the scenery from a carriage. One moment the interlocutor on the opposite bench distracts you. The next a bump gives a hard jolt. Smoothly, as if drawn by a ruler—it never quite works. But a pumpkin—it is a ruler in time, as it were."

"Well… that is, until it bursts," Aris observed.

"There you are right."

They proceeded into the house. The boy was not invited along. He did not press the matter, however. He was wholly absorbed by the giant pumpkin.

⁂

"To your recovery! What are your plans? Will you have coffee?"

The former armorer deftly poured the beverage into two cups without awaiting consent.

"I have already been treated, thank you," Aris declined, taking his portion from Armoor's hands. "I shall go to the library. I shall search for something regarding the body's adaptation at this altitude. Then to the rector. Afterward I wished to invite you to the grotto. This rapier—it is almost alive. I am uneasy going there alone with it, you understand."

"What rector?" Armoor inquired with keen interest.

"The rector of Haven. The local authority."

"There is no such person," Armoor informed him. "And never has been."

Armoor glanced at the charron somewhat askance, suspecting him not yet fully recovered.

"Then who is depicted on the mountain? What authority figure?"

"The Count? He is a mythical character. The ancient forebears of Haven's denizens entered this world thanks to him. Or because of him. So they believe… Some of them believe so."

But then Armoor added: "Few."

Aris, somewhat disconcerted, approached the partly open window. He looked at the trees in the garden and noticed the boy:

"Hey, lad," he called the boy over. "And who is in charge around here?"

"The Assembly of Audient Friends," the boy answered.

"And who is chief among them?"

The boy pondered.

"They set the chairs in a circle. They sit in a ring," he said at last. "All the chairs are alike. I peeked."

"Well, perhaps one chair faces the direction of the Great Mountain? Perhaps the chief person sits there?" Aris persisted.

"What do you mean, mister? We're already at the very top of the Great Mountain."

Armoor observed:

"Geophysically he is correct. Above the lake level there are many hills along the shoreline of the caldera, but no dominant peak."

Aris deemed it prudent to remain silent regarding his interaction with the "rector." Never before had past illnesses aroused in Aris such a mixture of feelings as the recent malady—he felt simultaneously passive disquiet and active irritation.

"Then we shall request a meeting with these Obedient Friends," he grumbled.

"Audient," Armoor corrected. "That can be done."

Belatedly, Armoor set biscuits upon the table.

"I do not wish to distress you, but Jinngo appeared a few days ago," said the former armorer.

The charron possessed excellent self-command. He always had. And now he did not falter, saying strictly to the point:

"An act of oath-breaking has occurred. It must be rectified."

Armoor looked out the window and extended a small coin to the lad:

"Ho, boy! Do you know Madam Ratu? The Judge from the lower lands. Yes. Her. Find her. Have her come. Tell her to bring the newly arrived one."

⁂

"Rid of him at last. An importunate little scamp," said Armoor.

"It is not his fault—his world has not yet grown complex," Aris followed the boy with his gaze.

"You are right. Here in Haven no one is an orphan, but everyone is a child."

"Do you envy that your life has passed by… such an elevated place?"

"Well," sighed Armoor, "some live above, some below—they will never come to an understanding."

"But at present you are in your own garden," Aris attempted to hearten the old armorer. "And if you grow bored—shall I take you below? I have been pondering since morning in which land to hide from the wrath of the new chancelloress."

"Below? Do you know… the taste of strawberries brings back childhood," Armoor seemed to let the remark about his daughter pass unheard. "Just beyond my plot a hill begins. It is covered in berries. Let us go and gather a basket or two for tea."

"I fear shortness of breath, my dear Armoor."

"It is a whole city of flowers and berries," Armoor insisted. "Come. As for my daughter… her childhood does not depart from me; it merely waits for me to close my eyes. Virgilia is a foster daughter."

Aris thought that Armoor's attire was too grand for a ramble over hilly heaths. To be sure, anyone would have thought the same. His tennure sighed like a jellyfish with every step. The sikke on his head, the khirka on his shoulders—none of it accorded with reality. Even in so sumptuous a house. Still less as equipment for gathering wild berries. The charron naturally gave no sign of his bemusement. Especially since the landscape opening before them was wondrous.

"Forgive me, Armoor. I did not mean to wound you. I am unjust: besides your stepdaughter, all the ecclesiastical nobility and half the secular have a grudge against me in the lands of arable fields. But, the Forebears see, I have not the slightest connection either to the Faith of Mutual Breath or to the gendarme coup under the leadership of your… On the whole, I have been sucked into some whirlpool of circumstances."

Aris caught his breath, unable to admit to himself that a significant part of that whirlpool was Prithrea. The mixed grasses around them seemed to breathe. Sparse dried flowers stood as high as a man, proving by their very dryness that this was a realm of the modest and the gifted. Berries were everywhere.

"All is well. I am not offended. And I counsel you to accept reality. Perhaps that same whirlpool allowed you to survive and live at such an altitude. Is it conceivable? This is not like sailing from the delta lands to the field lands for a sennight over slick waves in a swift sailboat. The air here is several times thinner than in the highest arable territories."

"Fair enough," Aris agreed. "Do not take it as impertinence, but allow me to ask: who told you of Avertigus's dance?"

"Avertigus? Why not Prithrea's?"

"The whirling-with-oaths… opened breath where it ought not… more associations with our ailing world, confound it," Aris explained, somewhat disingenuously.

"Ailing? Come, come, young man. As for me, I cursed no one. I did not whirl at all. And did Haakon dance?"

"He danced," Aris answered. "He conceals it for some reason. But I know: there was a dance while the Judge and I were at the bagnio. I always note how the things in my hut are arranged, even the most insignificant. I am ashamed to confess, but the floor in my home is such that even tracks remain upon it."

"Do you know… regarding you, and the Judge, and the priest… I would not be so certain. Perhaps your endurance of this air is an inborn thing, and not at all the result of a dance."

"How is that?!" Aris was taken aback.

"As with me," Armoor replied calmly. "Have you traveled outside our belt before this?"

"Of course. I have been to the delta, as all schoolboys."

"That was a journey downward. Upward is far harder. Have you heard of children from the deltas often being brought up on excursions? You see."

Aris had caught Armoor in a breach of logic more than once before, perhaps deliberate.

"It seems to me you are evading the answer, Armoor. What gave you the ability to breathe here, if not the dance?"

"I told you: such a strength has always been with me," Armoor replied with iron in his voice.

"Then it follows you are the only one of your kind," Aris could not conceal the skepticism in his tone.

"I am the only one of my kind," Armoor repeated unhurriedly.

The armorer unfastened several clasps on his robe and bared his shoulder slightly. The charron's eyes widened involuntarily. After a moment he asked:

"How much do you weigh, then?!"

"No more than a small sheep. Partially freed from the dictatorship of the objective world, as you see. Every night, when I calmly peel off this civilisational lie"—Armoor patted his clothes—"to reach the true fabric of myself, I recoil in horror from what I discover in my own nakedness."

Aris was about to think of a way to change the subject, but from here, from this particular Clear Yea-Nay Glade, the monument to the Count was not visible. Worse, the charron was sure that from below, from the Count's position, this place was visible. What a fierce sabotage of non-resistance. But the green hill, hunched like a cat lying in ambush, beckoned with the softness of its grassy cover and brought calm. Flocks of birds in the sky traced the lines of its cosy folds.

In the other direction, below, the armorer's house stood with its chimney smoking—the very stove thanks to which the strawberry gatherers had lately drunk a hot beverage. Its walls, as became apparent from here, were not vertical. It leaned slightly toward the lake, inviting them back. Aris and Armoor, however, for now declined its summons and began to climb higher.

"Do you hear my shortness of breath?" the charron pointed out to the armorer a fact that contradicted an innate independence from thin air. "I am not imagining it."

The charron adjusted the barrel of his back-scabbard, which had shifted slightly askew, without attaching significance to it.

"It sometimes happens that the organism imagines things without informing its owner," Armoor objected.

"I tell you, stubborn armorer, imagination has nothing to do with it. I truly find it difficult. It is a summons from my body to responsibility, not the fabrications of a consciousness inflamed by the stream of events."

Armoor laughed. He had come upon a bush particularly rich with berries.

"Behold, as it were, my labor—is that it?" he looked at the charron with a childlike smile. "You, friend charron, ought to be sending dispatches to your own body, as in your days as a courier of special assignment."

Aris laughed too. His mood had suddenly become excellent. The fuller the basket, the lighter the soul.

"Rather—'Behold my bewilderment,'" he corrected the armorer.

"Bewilderment and you? No, those are incompatible phenomena. Or am I mistaken? Or was it not you who conceived and resolved to file suit against the entire Universe?"

"It was I," said Aris, without elaborating that he had then been under the sway of unthinkable despair.

Aris was suddenly seized by an unbearable urge to pull an arrow with a habitual motion from the quiver on his back—which was not there now—to nock it in his bow and shoot. At the very least at that tree five minutes' walk away. But he had no bow with him. Only Prithrea's rapier.

"So I thought. It did not seem like an act of Prithrea's. Do you know what you failed to account for in your maneu… your deed?"

"It would be easier to list what I did account for," Aris smiled. "The answer is null."

At the top they found a path—they decided to descend by it for the sake of saving time: below, a full vat of reproach from the long-waiting Judge surely awaited them. Chains of canine tracks served as elegant edging to the path—the clever animals chose the most comfortable, moderately yielding soil for their paws.

"You failed to account for a most elementary thing, my young friend. Even if Avertigo wished to answer your suit, how could he formulate his reply?"

"I do not understand," said Aris, who was now mostly scanning for notable targets that he might strike with a bow.

"You and he are not on familiar terms. If Avertigo were to speak, he would do so as Avertigus—in phrases that are fundamentally formal. Avertigus can say nothing, cannot answer, because a statement must contain his intent. And he cannot have intent, therefore he cannot construct a sentence. Syntax does not permit it."

"Why can he not have intent?" the charron could think of nothing else to say in continuation of the conversation.

"Intent belongs to one who possesses vulnerability. One may think and reflect as much as one likes, but that does not create self-awareness and, consequently, intent."

"Indeed?" Aris asked rather foolishly.

"Precisely so, my friend," Armoor affirmed. "Judge for yourself. Had I not adopted Virgilia, she would not have survived to the present day. But I did not adopt her in order to save her—it merely turned out that way. Because… ask me now whether I would have wanted her with me when she was a little girl, and I shall say yes, I would have. Yet it would have been better had it not been bound up with her then-vulnerability and my present responsibility."

Understanding nothing of the armorer's logic, Aris asked:

"Then how can one help Avertigus find a reason to say something?"

"Is it worth it?" Armoor shook his head. "I do not know how."

The smell of smoke from the chimney of Armoor's house became audible. Nature, as if with a click, switched into a coastal mode with the cries of gulls.

"But what are you doing here, Armoor? I shall not believe you merely decided to return the rapier. Or ought one to believe that?" Aris asked, as penetrating as chimney smoke.

"Come now," Armoor waved it off, opening an inconspicuous gate in the rear fence of his plot, "I have all my life wanted to grow such a pumpkin. Delivering an important article to its true owner is an excellent pretext to realize a dream. And if you have never had a real dream—then all that remains is the memory of a memory."

The charron was not listening: he had realized that during their walk one of the buckles in the complex structure of Prithrea's scabbard had been lost. One of the straps hung helplessly with its free end downward, pointing directly opposite to the axis of the Cylinder. Of course, there was no question of setting out now to search for it—they were already awaited in the house.

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Fragment 37. Tribunal

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Armoor had not locked his door upon leaving. The Judge, the ruddy-cheeked hulking Jinngo, and, for some reason, the boy were seated in the parlor. The returning party were, naturally, reproached for having kept everyone waiting, but they managed to buy their way out with fragrant berries.

Jinngo had not altered one whit in appearance. Aris could not decide what would have angered him more—a former Chancellor bearing the marks of an arduous journey that ought to have invited sympathy, or Jinngo exactly as he was. His clothing, of Chancellor's cut—thankfully not formal—was immaculate. His coiffure without flaw.

The tribunal was convened in the garden, in the brisk highland air. By then the stove had been damped down, for the smoke had begun to creep along the ground. Its services were, in any case, no longer required.

"You broke your oath?" Ratu asked the optician Jinngo.

"I did," said Jinngo. Try as Aris might to detect mockery or falsehood in the word, he could not.

"Of what did the oath consist?"

"Of nothing. Null. We set down no formulation."

"Thus, an obligation was given, but its content equals emptiness. Did you conceive of this oath as a juridical loophole?"

"I did not."

"Consequently, the guilt lies not in the act but in the existence. The oath-breaker attempted to fulfill the oath, thereby acknowledging that it possessed content. A fitting punishment is the acknowledgment of the meaninglessness of one's own fidelity. Do you accept the essence of this punishment?"

"I do."

"Aris, that is charron Aris, name the final term of the punishment."

"One year," Aris, having tested the absurdity of the situation this way and that inside his head, decided to name a term that would attract the least attention and fewest unasked questions.

"Jinngo, do you accept such a term?" the Judge asked with full severity, and Aris barely kept the muscles of his face from betraying his mounting skepticism.

"I do."

"I consider the matter settled," Ratu said with satisfaction. She beckoned the boy and Armoor: "Witnesses, I ask you to accept half each of the firmabider's red tether, severed in accordance with the substance of the case."

The Judge put away the casket of threads. The witnesses tucked their allotted snippets out of sight. Meanwhile Jinngo exhaled without inhaling and looked like an owl. It seemed that once the optician Jinngo had been sentenced to live a whole year in a world where his "Yes" and "No" weighed the same zero, everyone proceeded into the house with enormous relief.

Having loitered without purpose in the parlor while the host prepared the meal, the guests—at his invitation—passed into the dining room. Armoor's house, unassuming from without, was quite rich within. Though why wonder: the purse of a Chancellor's father-in-law and a Chancelloress's stepfather could hardly be lean.

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During the meal Jinngo spoke and clattered all the while with his cutlery. By enlisting the plates to provide the sound-effects for his speech, he evidently hoped to enhance its intelligibility.

"I am not making excuses, but I was ousted unjustly," said the former Chancellor. "It all began because of that foolish transparent bridge."

"It did collapse then?" Aris inquired.

"Worse! It turned out that the runners on the course had misjudged their strength. All the tournament tables and the bookmakers' mathematical coefficients went to ruin. A great many solid people lost a great deal of money."

"And then what? Did they simply come and throw you out of the palace?"

"Of course not. At first I redoubled my efforts. I mean my optical investigations. I tried to understand how this material of Prithrea's works. It tickles very strongly, it seems."

"How do you mean?!"

Everyone regarded the optician Jinngo with keen interest. Except the boy—he, buried in his plate, was gobbling away for all he was worth.

"It shoots off sparks. Trembles like an invalid. That is, if the piece is long. And the bridge, as you can imagine, was long indeed. It must have stung every titled runner in the heels, so they banded together as a cartel and complained of me to their benefactors and patrons."

Armoor raised his brows in surprise:

"So, do the transparent swords nip like that too? What did you discern under the minikin glass?"

"The swords sometimes give off a glow, but very fleeting," Jinngo replied. "But no, they don't tickle. The minikin glass isn't strong enough to see what's there. But I sense it—with an optician's instinct I sense—something alive is there. Or nearly alive."

"And why could Virgilia not protect you?" asked Virgilia's father. "Or did she not wish to?"

Jinngo leapt up, absurd in his rich doublet, and threw up his hands. Aris felt very sorry for him. He even regretted having instigated this trial—formally correct though it was, it was humanly foul.

"I don't know, dear father-in-law… dear former father-in-law… or perhaps not former… In short, she has troubles of her own enough to drown in. Wars have begun, you know."

"And you, perchance, did not betray her?" asked Armoor. "We have already heard one such case today."

"Good heavens, no!" Jinngo waved his hands. "I love her dearly. They began to press her from all sides, so I decided to make myself scarce so that things might be easier for her. That very vertigo turned up just in time."

"Card-Panso, of course, reported to you the essence of the dance?" asked the charron, knowing the answer.

"Yes, that same day he danced it himself," the optician did not attempt to conceal anything. "In short, her power hangs by a thread, I think. And I only bring harm. Your help, Armoor, would not go amiss for her."

"You think so?" the armorer said with great doubt.

"I think so very much. And further... A fitting reflection visited me..." Jinngo began.

Aris interrupted:

"As harebrained as ever? Like the business with the clock?"

"And what of the clock?" Jinngo retorted hotly. "It all turned out rather well. At a certain stage. But listen!"

He raised both hands, as though attempting to irradiate his listeners with the warmth of his palms.

"Listen: I thought that one might tickle Avertigus with my bridge. Why the bramble did he not answer the suit presented to him? Wake him up! Let us do thus..." he embarked upon a technical plan.

"And we ourselves shall not be the worse for it?" asked the charron.

Jinngo was already on his feet. He had chosen his position so as to become the stage, if the rest were taken for the amphitheater. His arms moved like the sails of a mill, apparently depicting the points where the bridge-chord intersected the Cylinder's surface.

"How could it be worse," Jinngo reasoned sensibly and continued: "At the two extreme footings one must dig enormous pits, right down to the very body of Avertigus..."

Jinngo portrayed a giant corkscrew rather artfully.

"Have you ever heard of such pits?" Armoor inquired. "I am older than you, but I have not."

"That is because one must not dig, but bore," Jinngo was not in the least disconcerted. "As in a joiner's workshop. The augers could be smelted from the same transparent steel. They could be slender. I believe this tickling does not depend upon the thickness of the material. The chief thing is for the little laugh to run along the whole chord of the bridge—from one spot in Avertigus's hide to the other. He will surely wake. He will see what is happening on the earth because of his foolish unreliable Coriole. And he will set everything right."

"And does it not seem to you that that bath... that whirlpool, rather—the absence of a whirlpool in the bath... perhaps you merely imagined it all?" Armoor asked sternly. "The esteemed charron, too, may have been led astray by some-

thing. But the real causes of the disorders and wars are your barter-devices, the ideas in whose messages have found such favor with so many."

All now stared at the master of the house. This time—including the boy. Without looking at what his hands were doing, he pressed his spoon flat against the table so that half hung over the edge and flicked the end with his finger. A hideous sound rang out: "drrennn." The boy immediately received a scolding from Armoor for it. The spoon survived but was confiscated.

Armoor continued:

"The Faith of Mutual Breath is the sole concrete, tangible first cause of the coup d'état. And consequently—of the wars. The Flood, your foolish shows, even the trial... Those were witnessed firsthand by few, on a state scale. But the venomous messages reached everyone."

"And what's so terrible in them?" Jinngo asked foolishly.

"What's so terrible?!" Armoor exclaimed. "'To press one's side against god in a cramped coffin'—is that not enough?! It is a call for collectivity in faith. For centuries everything has rested upon division. Watersheds divide countries. Religions divide the world by altitude belts. Why, do you suppose, do people from the cold deltas of the Rivers never migrate en masse to us, to the warm arable lands?"

"Our air is thin," Jinngo answered uncertainly.

"One can grow accustomed to that," Armoor objected. "Not in the first generation, of course. But one can bear children and raise them accustomed. Why then do no clan movements occur? Because the faith is different. However much the Fatherate tries—they have thousands of times fewer parishioners in our territories. Their Church stands in the town center solely out of the authorities' courtesy. It is empty. While in the deltas—it is the reverse."

The room grew noisy without noise, as it were. It seemed as though three lads at once were twanging invisible spoons.

"In the formal language the difference is noticeable as well," Aris observed with irritation. "Their obligatory register of intent is understood as an answer to the question 'for the sake of what?', while ours is rather 'because of what?'."

"Naturally," the Judge, who had been silent until now, suddenly supported him. "They are traders, for the most part, and we are tillers of the soil. I will tell you more: the chief problem in the Faith of Mutual Breath is not the hint that the

lower lands and the territories of the Rivers' middle course ought to be brought closer. They preach shared responsibility with the gods. I tell you this as a jurist. Hitherto, in the traditional churches, there was only an indication of relation. The gods are either Parents or Makers. That is all! No 'mutual breath' for you."

Jinngo struck the table with his fist. Not hard, but enough to halt the conversation, which had turned into a nervous political disputation.

"Tickle him! It won't get worse," said Jinngo.

Everyone exchanged glances. The boy had vanished somewhere. Gradually, those seated at the table began to feel that this was an excellent idea.

Aris glanced out the window and sighed—there could be no thought of going to search for the buckle in the grass in such meager light.

⁂

Aris returned to his chambers greatly fatigued and somewhat vexed. Haakon was there. He inquired of the charron regarding his health, the news, his plans, but without awaiting an answer informed him that Card-Panso had contrived to obtain a post as librarian. Haakon further reinforced this news with the report that he, a priest weary of life and belonging to a faith no one needed, had been given a sennight to quit the chambers.

"They're strikin' us off provisions," he said. "You and the Judge—it touches you too. Hospitality has its limits, y'see."

"We have no money left, I take it?" Aris asked Haakon, who had served as the group's treasurer during the journey.

The latter shook his head, indicating that the funds received as donations were nearly exhausted. Aris lost all desire either to rest or to go to the library. All the more since he could ask Card-Panso to bring him books.

"And where is Card-Panso?" asked Aris.

"In the library, where else," Haakon answered.

"Well then let us go and consult with him on how to proceed, whom to approach regarding employment."

"I went already. It's closed there. A sign hangs on the door, a rather cross one. He's doin' some kind of inventory, the bramble knows… he opens to no one."

"Very well, then… And the optician Jinngo—will they turn him out too?"

"Nah, his term ain't up yet. And he's got plenty of money, anyway. Ask him, friend."

"I should prefer to avoid that," the charron said. "Ah, you didn't let me tell you. He has an idea..."

Haakon rolled his eyes, demonstrating his estimation of the optician Jinngo's ideas, yet he listened attentively to Aris's account. He was indifferent to the notion of tickling the Cylinder, but he was most intrigued by the fact that Armoor concealed beneath his garments an extreme, almost inhuman frailty.

"Weighs like a sheep, you say?" he rubbed his tanned, sharp chin thoughtfully. "That's amusin'."

The charron found nothing amusing in it and therefore betook himself to sleep in his room. Morning is wiser than evening, he thought. Yet a strange sound came from the direction of the entrance door: "zhdennn." Aris went to the door. Opened it. There stood that very boy. It turned out he had sought attention. He had chosen to pluck the door spring instead of knocking.

"You dropped this, master," he handed the charron the scabbard buckle.

Aris, in a surge of emotion, gestured to the boy: hold out your palm, then. The boy did so. The archer poured into it all his remaining coins, without counting.

The charron, happy, returned to his room. He had just removed the scabbard, undressed, and lain down in bed when the morning visit of the courier surfaced in his memory. The charron rose again, pulled the barrel organ from under the table, and opened the stiff lid mechanism, which gave off a sound of "zzunn."

He took out the envelope and this time examined it attentively. There was no return address. The envelope bore only a stamp. It was a face, and now he knew whose. Count NN's. He had no strength to begin reading, so he thrust the book back into the barrel organ. At that moment he realized that he had never before been quite alone with the barrel organ.

He removed from it everything that could be removed without the aid of tools. Inside the barrel organ remained the mechanism for barter-devices and the built-in psaltery. Having laid out the contents upon the floor, he inspected in turn an imposing set of instruments—locksmith's and optical—a multitude of samples of various metals, and also a large bridle. An ordinary bridle. Furthermore, there was a detailed map of Pentareach, folded in eighths, with three creases. The map bore no markings. The quality of the map was very high, but

the charron discerned nothing unusual. On the reverse was a pale pattern: centrally symmetrical. It had once been orange-yellow-black, the charron concluded.

Aris found it strange that the map had no markings. He could not recall a single personal map upon which the owner had not made at least a couple of marks. Marks of one's own. And what was this bridle? The buckles on it bore the same pattern as those on his scabbard. Though there was nothing astonishing in that—why would Prithrea have used different patterns for her buckles. Aris had secretly hoped to find a diary, but he found only a space—a niche—where one might have been. He placed "Hydrodynamics" inside, for the size suited perfectly. Lacking the strength to stow everything else away, he lay down and fell asleep. The lid of the barrel organ remained open.

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Fragment 38. A Visit from Smugglers

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Illumined only by the light of the full Moon, a large man of about forty sat upon a chair placed exactly in the center of the room. He wore a warm black redingote, too heavy for the season, with enormous lapels and a costly fur collar. One leg was crossed over the other, but one ought not to be deceived by the seeming ease of his posture. It was the stance of an interested observer. The fellow's figure was not static. His right black boot, its top gathered like an accordion, swayed gently, projecting concentration upon all that was potentially vulnerable. His hat lay upon his bent knee, held by two joints of his left hand's fingers. The lines of his neat bearded face with its sunken cheeks formed either a cone or a pyramid. In either case, the apex of this figure converged precisely upon Aris's nose.

"Who are you? I ask with the intent to..." the charron began, roused from sleep and raising himself onto an elbow in his bed.

"Silence, Hunchfront," said the brute in the black coat from the chair, quietly but firmly. "What's that glowing over there, eh?"

He pointed to the samples of Prithrea's metals laid out on the floor. A couple of the pieces gleamed faintly but distinctly. Aris, following the instruction, remained silent.

"Answer now," the man commanded.

At this Aris made out three more persons. Two stood in the far corner, their backs to the walls. Between them on a chair sat Haakon. Aris rubbed his eyes and realized that the man was not merely seated but was bound to the chair-back with twine. His mouth, naturally, was stuffed with a rag. On the table lay arranged neatly in a row: the rapier in its scabbard, Aris's bow, and an unfamiliar black sword. "Hm," Aris suddenly understood, "that's exactly like the one Haakon had when I first saw him during that skirmish in Mishitzbattleban. What the..."

"These are my possessions. What business is it of yours, scoundrel," said Aris, not inflecting the remark as a question.

"So here's the lay," the bearded one announced. "You're new here. I'm prepared to take that into consideration."

He rose and moved the chair closer to the bed. The charron sat up as well.

"You wouldn't have laid all this out so we could spot the glow through the window," he gestured at the objects on the floor. "So you're green."

The charron began to rise, shifting the weight of his chest's keel forward.

"Sit still for now. Don't trifle, else your comrade might get cut accidental-like," the man in black nodded the back of his head toward the trussed-up Haakon. Then he continued: "Here, beyond the jurisdictions of all five lands, only we may possess lustrous metals. So it turns out you've got our goods. You've three choices: buy 'em back, work 'em off, or hand over the metal to us and pay a fine. There ain't no burgomasters or gendarmeries hereabouts. We'll see it done, have no doubt."

At these words Haakon began kicking his legs vigorously.

"Well?" the chief butted the air near his powerful brow, "open his mouth."

"A bargain?" Haakon blurted as soon as the gag was removed. "We'll deliver a cargo to Volmelftstein for you in a day or two, weighing about as much as a couple of melons."

The man in the redingote raised an eyebrow.

"Take it, chief," advised one of the accomplices standing in the corner. "Not much weight, but it spares us all the same… just thinking on that clammy, sticky air there breaks me out in a sweat."

"Besides, all the borders are crumblin'… shipments are in doubt," added the other bruiser in the corner.

"Did you search their kit proper?" the chief asked his underlings.

"Thorough, chief. Nothing of worth besides the metal, just an old map with a mandala of rebirth on the back. Take it?"

"What are we, thieves or robbers…"

The chief paced the room and made his decision:

"So. The old man's now answerable. Stow the metal away, hunchfront. Don't let it gleam. Don't go trying to peddle it here—there's no guardsmen to protect you. Fail to hold up your end of the bargain—you'll still have the other two choices.

And the fine, naturally. A hundred coins. The cargo will be delivered here tomorrow. Try to run—we'll have your heads."

All three left in a matter-of-fact manner; the severed rope from the chair fell to the floor under its own weight. The door did not slam, the door spring did not creak.

Aris went to the door—the screws had been removed, the spring was gone. He peered outside—there was nothing but moonlight.

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"You're a swindler, Hole-kon," Aris said ruefully, subtly implying he was not far from thinking Haakon might also be a mole. "Where have you been hiding that sword all this time?"

The charron sat on the floor in a posture extremely ill-suited to his physiology, stowing the items laid out on the floor into the barrel organ.

"Nowhere, master. Saw it here yesterday—couldn't resist, bought it."

"Dzenn," Aris angrily slotted another metal plate into its groove inside the barrel organ.

"Saw it? Just like that... at a fair... in a religious haven... Here's what I'll tell you. You, Haakon, were looking for such a chance. And then, when you found it—you blew all our money."

"Guilty, master," the old man hung his head.

The priest, with downcast eyes, paced the room in short nervous steps and grumbled addresslessly under his breath: "Why do I need a sword, why do I need a sword... I shall punish the ruin of faith and law. Let them hate, so long as they fear."

"Of course... He's guilty..." another plate clanked into its appointed place. "You led them to us. Do they peer into every window by night, hunting for lustrous metals? And a man who buys weapons under the counter is no sin to check up on. And what sort of metal is this, do you know?"

"No, master, I don't."

"And how you'll deliver the smugglers' cargo, do you know?" Aris laughed bitterly.

"I've a notion, dear charron," Haakon the Good smiled, "I have!"

Aris rose from the floor with a motion far from graceful. He dressed unhurriedly. Put on his boots. And then suddenly seized a wooden plate and, in a fit of pique, sent it spinning swiftly straight at Haakon's head. The latter, without particular effort, intercepted the dangerous missile.

"What's the matter, master, have you lost your wits?!"

"You see, you're alive!" Aris exclaimed with resentment. "What do you need a sword for if they truss you up like a kitten. Tied to a chair! What a disgrace. Do you understand they climbed right into my soul?! They pawed her things. You curly-haired swine."

"They, the curs, unscrewed the little spring! You see for yourself! They made not a rustle, the demons."

"The door should be bolted!"

"I did bolt it, master. Truly I say," Haakon suddenly whispered in a dreadful voice: "I've heard there are pieces of metal—they can grasp iron right through a door. With air! They slid the latch from outside, I tell you."

"What are you driveling on about, old man," Aris waved him off.

"Just try with those bits in her barrel casket. Try it yourself," Haakon insisted.

"In the barrel organ, Haakon," Aris said wearily, "what barrel casket, you illiterate ass."

The charron, nevertheless, did not dismiss the former priest's theory. The metal had gleamed, after all—the unexpectedness of that fact could not be denied. First he tried the two samples that had glowed in the night. No effect. However, among Prithrea's collection there was a piece of metal that indeed exhibited precisely the property Haakon had described: one had only to apply it to the outer side of the door, and it formed a soft and springy, yet sufficiently strong bond with the iron bolt. Aris satisfied himself that, with a certain care, it could be slid open from outside almost soundlessly.

"You're right, Haakon," Aris admitted in boundless surprise. "But I still don't want to help you with the smuggling. To be honest—I don't want to see you at all just now."

Aris did not lie down. He sat gazing out the window until the light of Avertigus's sky began to glimmer. To spend hours by a window requires a paradoxical sort of curiosity. Aris had long known that the world could be apprehended in two ways. One could set out on a journey, or one could let the world revolve

around oneself, as if Avertigus had permitted you to hop off him like from the step of a diligence. Aris had heard that the tongue of the forebears possessed a special word for those who, having run up belatedly to a coach's departure point, looked about in dismay, unwilling to accept at once that the transport had gone. Aris asked himself pointedly whether that word suited him. With inward anger he answered himself and the world "no!"

"I'll go find Card-Panso," he said at last. "Not a groat to our name, we need to get some work or a post. We'll use a padlock henceforth, clear? Both outside and in."

Aris noisily shoved the heavy barrel organ under the table, put on his hat, and went out. After a couple of heartbeats he returned, muttering something to the effect that in this supposedly thoroughly spiritual haven absolutely no one could be trusted. He took his licensed bow and again moved toward the exit, saying that one could thus be deprived of both one's professional tool and one's document. Then, evidently, the thought occurred to him that a bow without a quiver of arrows was no bow at all.

Thus, armed to the teeth, he finally quitted the chambers.

¶

Fragment 39. Properties of Metals

¶

Out on the street Aris realized that it was still very early. He would not, of course, find Card-Panso at the library. He did not, however, slacken his pace. If you are leaving—leave.

The settlement was sleeping away the last hours of the night. Aris stepped off the stone pier onto the embankment and turned right, toward the main trading street. Gulls sat on every roof, by the dozens. It was unclear whether they slept or observed the sole pedestrian. Studying the houses, Aris concluded that the settlement had begun to be built precisely from here—every structure had annexes and other additions clearly not envisioned when the buildings were founded. Here a stovepipe had been affixed atop a wall, there a staircase jutted out, disrupting the evenness of the lines. The chaos, however, was not ugly or oppressive. It even suited the embankment that it had been constructed and reconstructed through hundreds of accretions. Everywhere lay scattered bricks of ideas and attempts to arrange life a little better.

He turned left, onto Trade Street. Here the houses were taller, grayer, and more solid. The ground floors were occupied by shops and other establishments. The second and third floors evidently held revenue chambers—it was hard to imagine any solid merchant enduring the bustle here. But at this hour there was no one about. Almost no one. A couple of shopkeepers had already begun setting out shelves with their most saleable wares onto the street. Here and there handcarts stood by open doors. Aris walked on. Someone hailed him:

"Careful there, or you'll bring down both me and yourself! Guaranteed!"

And indeed, the daydreaming charron had nearly walked headlong into a tall ladder propped against the wall. Atop it stood a man with a stick in his hand. With this stick he was trying to right the jammed mechanism of a folding awning. For some reason the awning was affixed not above the ground floor but above the second. The charron peered inside the establishment through the huge windows and realized it was a wealthy carpet shop, where the sales floor occupied a room with exceedingly high ceilings—a full two stories. Magnificent car-

pets hung upon the lofty walls, displaying their patterns to customers in all their glory.

The charron assessed the situation: either the ladder was too short, or the stick was, or the shopkeeper's reach. Or perhaps all together.

"I'll help you. I have nothing to do anyway. I'm almost certain it will work. Climb down," he said to the shopkeeper.

The latter shrugged, wobbled from the gesture, and consequently began to descend hastily. The charron took this as consent. He drew a shorter arrow from his quiver, removed its sharp head, and in the blink of an eye loosed the blunt shaft precisely at the spot that was causing difficulty. The force was calculated so truly that the awning settled into the desired state with minimal noise and tremor. What is more, the charron managed to catch the rebounding arrow without taking a single step aside. He screwed the head back on, returned the arrow, touched two fingers to his hat in a gesture of farewell, and made to move on.

"Do let me stand you a coffee; the morning is brisk. I feel the need to show gratitude, and I wouldn't mind a chat—I know you're one of those who brought the catafalque. Mind you, your mission leaves me neither hot nor cold, I can tell you with all plainness. But your skill has inspired me, though it profits me little either."

Aris glanced briefly into himself and saw not a single reason to refuse free coffee.

"I shall accept your offer with a certain readiness: I am not averse to drinking coffee, and I have no money of my own for it. On the other hand, of course, I would not die without it, nor even be distressed."

The shopkeeper smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and bustled inside, having first set two light wicker chairs out onto the pavement.

While the carpet merchant brewed coffee, Aris simply sat and gazed at the opposite side of the street. There stood a shop with the sign "Threads and Tethers." The same inscription appeared on the window. There was nothing remarkable in the window itself. There were not even any threads in it. But leaning against the wall was an astonishing scooter. Aris had had a scooter in childhood too. An ordinary one. Like everyone's. This specimen represented an engineering experiment. It had wheels that could hardly even be called wheels. An ordinary wheel —a rim—leaves a track like a stripe upon the ground. A wheel, if laid flat, would touch the surface with its entire circumference. That is a flat thing. Not in the strict mathematical sense. In the everyday sense. A squashed cylinder. But the

"wheel" of this scooter, as Aris could easily imagine, would leave a track like a wave. Like a slithering grass snake. This thing was undulant along the direction of its axis.

"You have demonstrated exceptional archery skills, albeit in an unseemly manner," said the shopkeeper, returning from the depths of his shop and setting a coffee service upon the little table. "My interest is whetted, naturally, by the supposition that you were hired to guard that which you delivered in the catafalque. In my mind, your ability and the presumed importance of the cargo have, as a matter of course, been set side by side. I fully recognize, at the same time, that knowledge of that cargo is unlikely to improve my life."

The charron felt not the slightest awkwardness upon hearing this question without a question mark, and replied:

"The meaning of that 'cargo' is unknown to me, and there is no sense in concealing that I have seen it. Just as there is no sense for me in initiating you into the details, despite my being under no obligation to keep a secret. The situation, as you may already have sensed, is highly ambiguous. It was no source of comfort to me before this conversation, and I do not intend to aggravate that discomfort."

Contrary to the expectations of a typical idle chatterer, the shopkeeper was not in the least disconcerted by such an answer. Quite the reverse.

"You have shared with me an emotional charge of superb density. It permits me sufficiently to sense how chaos gradually arrives from the lower lands. I shall put a direct question to you, because the answer to it will allow me to plan my life better, which, correspondingly, renders the quality of your subsequent reply important to me. Is your arrival a consequence of the wars that have broken out below?"

Aris answered with all meticulousness, not because formal speech demanded it. He wished to answer scrupulously irrespective of the mode of communication.

"Our arrival and the wars share a single set of causes. I wish to answer you not more amply, but more precisely, for in conversation a new understanding is often born of that which you have repeatedly pondered in solitude. Something unusual has occurred. That is true. No, not so. Perhaps a sufficient number of people suddenly noticed something unusual that they had not noticed before. Not necessarily in consequence of this, but after this the so-called Faith of Mutual Breath began to gain popularity with lightning speed. Again, after this, authority was shaken."

"Whose authority, if I may clarify?" said the shopkeeper. "I ask for the reason that we have no state authorities here, and even the local authority has altered in the last couple of decades. I inform you so that you may better understand the context of my attempt at clarification. A most crucial point, in my view."

Aris replied:

"I know with certainty only of the authority of Illumiros—I tell you in the former context. But in another register I have to inform you that the Code of Inviolable Formularies itself has ceased to be a juridical and cultural constant. I must say that I inform you of this in the rather self-interested expectation that you will enlighten me regarding the phenomenon of your local rector."

"By way of thanks for the conversation, I wish (and can!) to inform you, on condition of non-dissemination (and, moreover, with the demand that you do not mention me in this connection under any circumstances), that the rector was, is, and shall be. He, however, for some time now prefers to remain unnamed. We, the local denizens, have no agreed opinion as to how many generations the rector has gone unnamed. No one remembers."

"Ah! So you do not even know whether he is replaced or not?"

"We do not."

"Is that a problem?"

"Not yet. An innate subtle ability to know what is good and what is not so is planted in us from the start. It is extremely difficult to lead us astray, if it is possible at all. The rector as such is not all that necessary to us."

"Then the war below is… of no import to you."

"Of no import."

"And what of the smugglers? How do you tolerate their ambiguous morals?"

"They are useful."

"In what way?" the charron marveled.

"They bring bridegrooms and brides. From time to time. Without that we would have degenerated. They seek out, down there in your lower lands, those who can live here."

"How do they do that?"

"If we knew, we would have no need of their services, would we?"

"True," Aris said sadly. "I, for one, had no need of their services, but they thrust themselves upon me, so that now I owe them a service."

"You could not buy your way out?" the shopkeeper sympathized.

"We have no money at all," Aris complained.

"With your skills the problem can be solved. No later than today. An archery contest begins at noon. Notices are posted here and there throughout Haven; you will surely see one if you keep an eye out. You may read the conditions there. I am neither an archer nor a devotee—I do not know the details. But I am certain that handsome prizes are competed for. Including monetary premiums. Go and win."

"I am most grateful to you. I shall do so. Before I depart, I will ask: do you know the author of this invention?" Aris indicated the scooter.

"How could I not. That is his shop. Remarkable wheels, are they not? Like our life. Like Avertigo."

"In what sense?" Aris did not understand.

"A simple wheel is the same for every point of the path beneath it. But this one turns differently for different places. The rotation of Avertigo is likewise different for each, though it is the same in length of period for all."

Aris was tempted to ask why this "individual rotation" amounted to five hundred minus thirteen days, but as he had no personal experience verifying that fact, he deemed it proper to remain silent. The charron thanked the man once more for the coffee.

Aris took his leave and continued his way up the street.

⁂

The library was housed in a plain two-story building with a low roof. Three identical second-story windows were curtained from within; two windows below were shuttered. Despite the freshly painted pale-green window frames, the watered plants in large tubs, and the swept porch of five high stone steps, the building looked abandoned. On the third step sat the Judge.

"And here you are," she said upon seeing Aris, robbing him of the fitting remark. "Not the first time I've stood watch here. Where is Card-Panso, the bramble take him?"

"The drawbacks of a covert system of governance," Aris said, too grimly for so bright a morning. "It is unclear who his superior is, in order to… In order to do what, exactly? Why do you need Card-Panso, my dear Ratu?"

The advantage of settlements situated upon hills is that there is always something to look at, thanks to the difference in elevation. The Judge and the archer sat on the porch, below the library entrance, yet they could see what was happening on the rooftops across the street. That early morning, as ever, life was astir there. The principal actors were, of course, cats and gulls. The former sought to deceive the latter. In defense of the cats, who might have been accused of aggression, it ought to be noted that the gulls laid claim precisely to those fish remnants in the drying creels that the cats also counted upon.

"The cats' coloring here is peculiar," the Judge observed. "Irregular little black circles on dazzling white."

"The stray dogs here are the same," Aris summed up.

The Judge tossed a pebble at one of the cats. Though it was uncertain—perhaps she had aimed at one of the gulls. Ratu said as she did so:

"I have the feeling that someone is leading us—me, at the very least—by the nose. More precisely: I am trying to grasp something, to sniff it out, if you will permit the phrase, but all scents are concealed. To put it quite simply, it is unclear what to do and where to seek means of subsistence."

"We have caught the local malady—our leadership has withdrawn into the shadows like the mythical rector of Haven," Aris joked darkly. "Have you been to the Chancellery?"

"Of course. Several people addressed me in formal language about nothing at all, and in such a way that I do not remember how many there were. It seems to me they expect some ritual from us. As if to say, you brought the bodies to our grotto, now do something with them."

Aris sat down on the stone step beside the former judge. The stone, contrary to a lifelong habit, proved warm—the difference in temperature between night and day in the caldera was slight.

"There you have it—freedom from state authority. The absence of direct pressure constrains the will worse than the gendarmerie and fiscal inspectors," the charon made a preamble in order to propose a practical plan for the first half of the day to the Judge. "They say there is an archery contest today. There will be prizes. I am confident I can win. Will you keep me company?"

Ratu, naturally, agreed, and they set off to find a notice in order to acquaint themselves with the rules. They did not have to wander long—the Judge knew of an intersection whose corners were plastered with various proclamations and advertisements.

Having pondered what she read, she asked:

"How do you rate your skills?"

"I am almost certain I can take first place," the charron answered simply. "There are not so many people here that there is a chance of meeting a talent."

"Are you so self-assured?" Ratu marveled. "And what of the peculiarities of the local air? Whence such optimism in you?"

"Look at me, Ratu," Aris smiled sadly. "With my outward attributes, what else was I to occupy myself with all through childhood and youth, if not training?"

The Judge nodded understandingly. And then she laid out her plan:

"Simply taking first place means using only a tiny fraction of your potential. We shall do otherwise. There are but a dozen rounds. In each round you will deliberately take whatever place I tell you. If I say first—you will take first. If I say seventh—you will take seventh. Understood?"

"That means I need to shoot last, that is all."

"Will you be able to discern who has shot what score before the results are announced?"

"Of course. My spyglass, I am certain, is better than any the locals possess."

"I shall endeavor to secure registration as the final number. And I shall place all the wagers. We shall stake the remnants in my purse and reinvest the winnings."

"I fear they will beat you at the end, Ratu. All the wagers cannot be placed in your name alone."

"You are right. Diligent Forebears, must we really involve Haakon?"

"We must not," Aris pronounced, mentally thanking the Judge for not suggesting the optician Jinngo.

They looked at one another. Once again they felt the helplessness of shipwreck victims. Their already tiny crew had quite fallen apart. Aris had to tell the Judge of the night's incident.

"I have no words," she said. "How little time it took to plunge into all manner of vice. What does he need a sword for? How and whom is there to rob here?"

"When I first saw him," the charron said musingly, "he had just such a sword. At that moment, it seemed to me I had never seen anyone more terrible. I know nothing of his past. I allow that his need for a sword—or perhaps for precisely such a sword—is of a character far from practical."

The Judge drew Aris away from the intersection where they had been lingering. The streets were beginning to fill with people—morning had come into its own. They seated themselves on a bench before one of the still-closed shops. In the window a magnificent mandala in the form of a clock, composed of buttons and notions, was displayed.

"I think, dear Aris, that you are speaking from unjustified mysticism. Or do you suspect that Haakon appeared in your life then as a result of Prithrea's manipulation?"

The charron looked at the Judge with alarm. The passers-by paid them no more mind than did those cats occupied with their disputes with the fish-thieving birds. Aris paid still less mind to the passers-by.

"If that is so, then you too were on that raft not by chance," he forced out.

The Judge darkened and answered without pause:

"Not by chance, but it is unconnected with you or Prithrea. At the moment the flood began, I was nailed to those gates. With a thick sack over my head and a gag in my mouth."

"Diligent Forebears! By whom? Why?!"

In the upper stories, shutters opened from time to time. Turquoise, pale gray—all were light, made of picket fencing. For this reason, the moment of their opening resembled an expression of surprise on the part of an unskilled and too-young strolling-theater actress. This filled the already inwardly dissonant morning with a sense of collision. The aesthetics of the place suspected the ethics of truth of something, just as a gull perched upon a roof suspects a lurking cat.

"Judges have enemies aplenty. I daresay half the condemned cherish plans of vengeance. True, nearly all lose that motivation as they move further from the day of the verdict. But not all. Yet, as you see, so malicious an execution proved salvation: some air, such as it was, remained in the sack, and the flood swept away the gates. Then the sack was washed off, and gradually I was freed of the bonds as

well. Though had it not been for the bonds, I would have been swept off the raft."

Aris listened to the Judge with his mouth agape.

"Astonishing. But there were people with you. Who were they?"

"Two of my assistants. We had arrived on an official visit to agree upon an exchange of convicts between towns."

"Were they dear to you?" Aris strove with all his might to suppress the trembling as he recalled the mutant with two brain segments he had slain at Prithrea's command. Even now he saw the god's hair sweeping away half the poor wretch's skull under the raft. Horror does not come late or early, Aris understood. It comes outside of time, because time belongs to it, and not to us.

"Of course. Colleagues. Many years of joint service. But the world is not malicious. It simply did not know that it was precisely I who was meant to suffer so badly that day. Why, you have grown so agitated… forgive me, I did not expect it to upset you so. Let us speak no more of it."

Since a pleasant spot proved incapable of shielding against pain, only rendering it more solitary, Aris was immensely glad of the change in the conversation's course and proposed:

"I have one semi-acquaintance. A shopkeeper. Not far from here. Let us go and try to engage him as the nominal holder of a portion of the wagers."

And they set off for the carpet shop. Not finding the man in, and hearing from his assistants their doubts that the proprietor should be expected back before noon, the hapless would-be organizers of a fixed match again grew disheartened. Aris's gaze fell, naturally, upon the now-open door of "Threads and Tethers."

"Let us step in," he proposed to the Judge. The latter, being a regular patron of such establishments in her capacity as a licensed procurer of firmabiders' red tethers, had no objection.

Behind the counter stood a middle-aged man. From his forehead to the very crown of his head gleamed a clever bald patch. His eyes were dark and large, and his right eye was noticeably wider than the left. This strange detail of his physiognomy created the impression that he was intensely interested in his potential customers and interlocutors. His moustache jutted upward in jaunty tufts. Echoing the briskness of the moustache, his snow-white collar was likewise directed heavenward. The gentleman—and one could not think to address him

otherwise—wore a genuine necktie. Such could be seen in the lower lands perhaps only upon an orchestral conductor. Here, his costume altogether looked incongruous.

"Is the scooter of your authorship, sir?" Aris asked. "I inquire in connection with..."

"Let's be on 'thou' terms, else I shall miss the greater part of the pleasure of boasting of my invention," the shopkeeper stunned Aris with the contrast between his appearance and his rhetoric, like a blow with a butt. "My name is Seraphinus."

"Aris," the charron bowed. "And this is Ratu, my colleague. Those wheels are likened to the very nature of Avertigus, are they not?"

The Judge also made a half-bow.

"Ho! You were able to perceive that? You are a sharp one. Greetings to you, Madam Ratu. Welcome to Haven."

The Judge thanked Seraphinus once more with a gesture.

"I confess I merely repeated the words of the proprietor of the carpet shop," Aris admitted.

"Ah, the neighbor. He, in turn, repeated them after me without understanding. He is a kind man, but incapable of such allusions."

"What dissatisfied you in ordinary wheels?" asked the charron.

"Ha!" Seraphinus emerged from behind the counter and invited his guests to sit. The salesroom contained precisely three armchairs. "There you have struck the mark. The probabilistic superiority of non-intent moved me. But through practical need. The unpredictability of such wheels is like a weapon. It is unclear where one will try to crush a twig, and where one will run over a pebble."

"And what of it—did cross-country capacity improve?" Aris inquired logically.

"How should I know, my dear Aris?!"

"But how..." the charron was confounded.

"Oho, I overestimated your engineering knowledge," Seraphinus said cheerfully, almost with a laugh. "Surely you did not think such a contraption could actually ride. There is no metal that would hold the bases of the spokes in their sockets. Everything would bend the moment one tried to ride it. That is why it stands here. As absurd paradoxical advertisement."

"But what if there is," said Aris, not expecting it of himself.

He was suddenly pierced by a half-thought, half-desire. He clean forgot why they had sought out the carpet dealer. The idea of earning money at the contest was instantly supplanted by the revelation that Prithrea's wondrous metals concealed a multitude of answers and possibilities.

For seven heartbeats Aris stood rooted to the spot, experiencing the awakening of retrospective meaning. The story he had told himself about himself proved not a lie, but an inferior translation from formal language into personal. He had not asked himself why he had brought the bodies of the Forebears here, because that question demanded a silence that had long been absent from his life. Whenever such a question merely approached the boundaries of the lit region within the infinite dark cave of his consciousness, Aris would kick it away with the firm knowledge that his journey held no justification for base impulses. Now his consciousness—not as a source of motivation, but as a humble press-secretary—reminded him of the obvious: "You have brought the Great barrel organ of Great Prithrea where it was meant to be. Let the people in the lower lands accuse the denizens of 'The Pale Wyrm Rider' of some imagined sun-worship. Prithrea declared that here they understand the movement of the elementals that inhabit metals and optics. That alone matters."

"To wake and take responsibility for one's own dream," the charron inadvertently uttered aloud a part of the thought that had overwhelmed him, though it remained perfectly trivial nonetheless.

"I too often ask myself: 'What if I have lived my life not as I ought?'" said the Judge, ever ready to sustain a wholesome conversation.

Seraphinus regarded his new acquaintances with interest.

"Shall we go and ponder the properties of metals?" Aris proposed to Seraphinus.

Literally within a couple of minutes, all three were trudging briskly toward the chambers in the guest house on the embankment. Seraphinus left his shop in the care of an assistant. It is good to be the proprietor.

¶

Fragment 40. Dislocation Here: Seraphinus and Prithrea's Barrel Organ

¶

As Aris, the Judge, and Seraphinus neared the guest house, a rain began to speckle. They stepped inside before managing to get wet. The chambers where the charron and Haakon lodged bore that grand title purely as a formality. In truth it was but three rooms. One served at once as antechamber, parlor, and kitchen. The other two were the private spaces of Aris and the former priest. The latter was not at home. That was understandable—sitting in one's room would not resolve the muddle with the smugglers. Especially smugglers whose ways were plainly bandit ways.

From the threshold Aris made to dart straight into his room, to bring out and show Seraphinus a couple of metal samples without a moment's delay. The Judge, however, managed with a single look to cast a lariat around the charron, that he might settle down and first show elementary hospitality. It was also possible that Seraphinus had not at all aroused in her the enthusiasm he had in Aris, and she wished to give herself time to study the thread merchant and, concurrently, engineer. That latter supposition had yet to be tested.

The charron uttered several perfunctory phrases of little consequence, drew up an armchair for the guest, made a few more aimless motions—more to neutralize the brake applied by Madam Ratu than truly to pause. And then he did duck into his room. Scarce two heartbeats had passed before something clinked softly behind the thin door, and Aris, his face aglow and cleaving the air with the keel of his chest, reappeared with two samples—one in each hand.

Seraphinus took them in his hands, sniffed them, felt them, scratched them with a nail. He patted his pockets—evidently seeking a lens. Finding nothing there, he was about to say something, but the Judge did not let him:

"What do you prefer, Seraphinus? Rice, wheat porridge, maize? Or perhaps simply boil some potatoes?"

"I'll have pota..." Aris began to say, but Seraphinus forestalled him:

"The matter is serious."

The rain drummed upon the roof above the third story so that it was audible down here, on the first.

⁂

Unlike Aris, the engineer saw through the Judge's game at once and accepted the rules.

"What you feed yourself determines how you think, how you reckon time, and how you build relations with your neighbor," said Seraphinus.

Ratu smiled:

"Certain plants are not mere food, but architects, are they not?"

"Rice will bestow upon us cyclical and lengthy patience, harmony, and flow," Seraphinus echoed.

"But we already have plenty of collectivism and hierarchy here in Haven," the Judge narrowed her eyes slyly.

"You are right, my dear Ratu. I am unequivocally against the hidden and sudden survival of the potato. Trust in the invisible is, of course, useful in our present affair, but leveling and vulnerability repel me in principle. It remains to choose between wheat and maize."

Aris looked at the pair as if they were mad.

"An interesting choice. Do we take the linear, seasonal, responsible conquest with individual aims? Wheat porridge?"

"No, you know… The mythological, the swift, the grateful transformation of interdependence will serve us better just now. Boil us some maize, wise Ratu," Seraphinus delivered his verdict.

"So be it," said the Judge with satisfaction. "I still cannot grow accustomed to the fact that here, in your kitchens on the Caldera, there are no smells of cooking food."

"You mean the sealed valve boilers?" Seraphinus responded. "What can one do? In this thin air it is impossible to cook a good soup or porridge without forcing pressure. I have read that it took the Forebears merely a couple of decades to progress from such a steamer to the prototype of a mechanical engine for self-moving carts and plows."

"Are you alluding to the bans and the persecution of inventors?" Ratu asked sternly.

"Why allude—I lament. But the chief thing is not the bans, but the absence of stimulus."

"Well... A man's cast of thought, his personal settings, his tastes, and even his very worldview—it is something that can be changed like clothing, according to the task's needs. A mindset."

"Personality is not identical to self," Seraphinus agreed. "Some can subject even the self to transitivity."

The Judge, Aris saw, had quite set her mind at rest regarding Seraphinus. Trust had put forth shoots.

"I want to remind you, dear Aris, that we have before us the task of winning the contest."

"Contest?" Seraphinus grew interested.

Encouraged as to the engineer's merits, the Judge laid out her scheme concerning the contest and the wagers. Seraphinus looked with respect at the charron's long licensed bow standing in the corner and said:

"Nigh everyone here knows nigh everyone. And this, of course, is nigh fraud. The locals would not be forgiven. And you would be subjected to exile, should it come to light, regardless of your mysterious mission. Better to spread all twelve wagers among people who cannot be readily connected to one another. In such a business there is no better assistant than the border guard Lariel. Wait a moment..."

With these words he went outside. Through the window it was visible that he approached the nearest awning set up at the fishermen's pier, exchanged a couple of words with some boy, and pressed something into his hand. A coin, evidently.

Then he returned.

"He will be found. I think within the hour he will be here. The contest, I suppose, will be postponed to a later hour. Few are capable of shooting accurately in the rain," he winked at the charron, standing on the threshold and shaking the drops from his shoulders. He wiped his bald head with a snow-white kerchief that proved to be in his pocket.

"Do take off your frock coat, Seraphinus, I shall dry it," said Ratu.

"I might go fetch a few tools. And then I'll undress."

Aris looked at the Judge. She, catching this glance, said:

"Understanding a secret imposes responsibility."

Aris fully heard the agreement in the Judge's words:

"Not in the rain, surely," he stopped Seraphinus. "There are tools. Shed your outer garments and follow me."

Seraphinus had no cause to object. He removed his frock coat, remaining in his shirt, and they proceeded to the far room. Aris closed the door from within. Here the window looked the other way, toward the caldera. The light was different—the rain had suddenly come down harder, and the clouds were moving in precisely from the lake. The archer lit two small lamps. Then, stooping without particular grace, he walked backward a few steps and dragged Prithrea's barrel organ into the middle of the room, leaving another pair of scratches upon the floor.

⁂

"Ugly without, beautiful within," the charron silently framed a remark, gesturing with his whole palm toward the barrel organ invitingly.

Seraphinus approached and squatted down close to the enormous device. The click of the lid proclaimed the beginning of revelation. Aris suddenly felt himself far older than Seraphinus, though in fact he was the younger. But it is the adult who sees only the designated function. The child sees possibility. Seraphinus seemed to have heard the current of Aris's thought:

"A mechanical wonder works only for one who has not ceased to believe that everything can become better," he said, bending over the barrel organ and opening the lid. Across the back of his snow-white shirt, the broad strips of his black braces stretched like a great "X" symbol.

Seraphinus did not begin extracting the instruments from the barrel organ, as probably any other person would have done. Instead he probed all the inner corners by touch. First it emerged that the side walls possessed at least three layers. "Cognizability without reduction," Seraphinus murmured, pressed upon a wall, and the barrel organ lost the shape of a parallelepiped.

"Easy, easy," said the engineer to the charron, who had nervously started toward him. "A mechanism can be taken apart, understood, repaired—but it does not cease to be a wonder. Now let us finish the transformation."

Then he somehow turned the device inside out and, with enormous effort, heaved it up. From beneath, four legs slid out of the heavy box under their own weight. Before them stood a small workbench. Of roughly the size that some watchmakers use, forced to huddle under stair flights at large covered city fairs. Optical and locksmith's instruments were built into the workbench. As for the metal samples, they all proved to be part of the construction. That part which Prithrea had used for converting messages in the barter-devices now proved to be somewhere within. The psaltery, too, vanished from sight.

Seraphinus straightened up, arched his back, cracked a vertebra, set his hands on his hips, and stated:

"An ideal model of cognition: a device that yields to understanding but does not lose its mystery."

"So what is it?" asked Aris.

"I said: 'does not lose its mystery.' I have not the faintest idea. A paradox of the artificially sublime." The engineer's contentment and self-satisfaction knew no bounds.

"Come to dinner," the Judge called from behind the door.

⁂

The table was already laid. Contrary to their straitened financial circumstances, the Judge had managed to create a sense of well-being. Seraphinus ate and praised; Aris kept pace.

Suddenly there was a scratching at the door from outside.

"Enter," the Judge took up the role of hostess.

On the threshold a drenched little figure formed—a boy. The guide and witness.

"You?" Ratu marveled. "What do you want? You're soaked. Come in."

"Seraphinus summoned me," the lad pointed his index finger rudely at the engineer. "Good day."

"Become acquainted," said Seraphinus. "Border guard Lariel."

"Border guard?!" Aris and Ratu sang in chorus.

"The most logical profession for a person of such properties," the engineer saw no cause for astonishment.

Ratu took the boy's wet cloak, sat him before a large plate, and treated him to maize. Everyone had to squeeze slightly to fit around the relatively small table.

Lariel grasped and accepted the essence of the assignment swiftly, uttering but a single phrase:

"You'll come with me," he pointed his finger at the Judge. And again, most impolitely.

When the maize was finished, he informed:

"They are destroying the Effigies in the lower lands."

"Who?" Aris did not understand. "They are defacing the Faces of the Forebears?"

"Want to scrape them clean away."

"So who?"

"Your kings of one kind or another, who else."

Aris and the Judge exchanged a glance, apparently finding in neither soul nor heart any distinct response save addressless disquiet. Partly to smother the unpleasant topic, Aris asked Lariel:

"You see and hear a great deal, I perceive. You know much. Have you seen Card-Panso in these last days? One of our party."

"Saw him once—he was hobnobbing with smugglers."

"Diligent Forebears! With the bearded one?"

"Half of them are bearded."

"In a black coat, with a fur collar..."

"Ah, no. With the brown ones."

"So there are many of them here! Do bandit battles happen too, I daresay?" asked the charron with an unpleasant chuckle, not expecting an answer.

The boy answered absolutely seriously:

"Nah, they don't fight inside the bounds of Haven."

"How you survive here," Aris said sadly. "Fine Haven at the very sky."

"D'you think it'd be better if instead of three there was one gang? Then we'd truly be howling," Lariel noted reasonably.

"Three!" Aris could not contain himself.

Meanwhile the Judge had readied herself to go out. She held the boy's cloak from behind, as for a grown and respected man, to make it easier for him to thread his arms into the not quite dry sleeves.

"I'll come for you," Lariel said to Aris. "Be ready for shooting."

He saluted Seraphinus in silence, and he and the Judge departed.

⁂

When Aris and Seraphinus returned to the device, it found itself in an altered state. Firstly, two platelets of metal were gleaming. Secondly:

"This thing here is turned differently," Seraphinus observed.

'Turned,' Aris grumbled inwardly, 'on this blasted heavy barrel-organ-workbench there are so many of these things that weariness and gloom have settled upon me.' Perhaps—and one cannot deny this explanation the right to exist—it was simply the result of a hearty dinner. A shadow cast upon the wall, the joint creation of the two lamps, the device's glow, and the window dimming before their eyes, resembled a set of scales. Aris sank into the armchair and, from the weariness of the long day, dozed off.

He started awake almost at once, however, and decided to take part in the process of investigation.

"What is this frame?" Aris pointed at the table.

"A recess for something. As though for a large sheet of parchment."

"The map!" Aris smote his forehead. "There is a pocket, it is turned inside out now. At the bottom."

Seraphinus opened the niche, clucked his tongue in self-reproach for not having noticed it at once. Drawing the folded map and the envelope with the book from the niche, he marveled:

"The seal on the envelope is ours, local. Did you find this article here?"

"No, I put the envelope with the book in it myself."

Seraphinus lost interest in the envelope, unfolded the map, and laid it in the recess that matched it in size.

The charron found watching Seraphinus irksome and began to picture Prithrea's face. The dear little dimples in her cheeks when she smiled.

"What curious handwritten marks," Seraphinus peered aloud.

"There were no inscriptions on the map," the charron informed him.

"But in this light—there are," the engineer said without surprise in his voice. "Strange: the map has an error. This tributary of the Great River of Illumiros does not exist."

Aris examined the map.

"It exists now," he said with undisguised irritation. "How selectively news reaches you from below."

He gave Seraphinus a brief account of the Flood. Only what one could have read in the penny sheets after the catastrophe. The news provoked not astonishment in Seraphinus, but irritation. Now the room held two angry men and a device.

"The smugglers concealed this fact. They did not wish to lower the price."

"What price?"

"Volmelftstein is now on the River. That means shipment there and back ought to be cheaper. I do not wish to speak of it. Not now. Let me study the marks, please."

Aris took this remark as a request to step away, which he did, taking the book with him. He settled in the neighboring room with the intent of reading it at last. With great difficulty he read the first page. It was some sort of novel written in an exceedingly strange tongue, about some miller. Aris leafed through the book, saw in it neither maps nor pictures nor formulas, then slowly closed it and slowly set it upon the table, as though this unhurriedness could convey to the unknown author his, Aris's, apologies for his readerly indifference.

He began to gaze out the window and to attempt to ready himself for archery. But upon the lake there was nothing for his gaze to fasten onto, so the exercise failed.

Then he remembered:

"Ah, I forgot to tell you. There are three things in the barrel organ about which I know something."

"Speak," Seraphinus raised his head from the map readily.

"First, one of the plates… this one… it can, as it were, 'grasp' iron through the air…"

To Aris's astonishment, Seraphinus merely nodded, as if Aris were telling him what sort of fish were found in the river.

"Why are you nodding? You know what that is?"

"I know. I have seen. Useful information. One could devise a great multitude of applications for such a metal, yet its prohibitively high cost kills feasibility at the root."

"Well, one never knows," Aris muttered.

"Second," he continued, "there is a psaltery in there..."

"I saw," Seraphinus said at once. "Only it is not a psaltery. It is a set of strings with a compatible internal resonance. Continue."

"And third, there is a thing there that alters the message in a barter-device. Have you a barter-device? I will demonstrate."

"We, as it were... do not welcome them here. Give me yours," Seraphinus offered. His expression clearly read that he had downplayed the degree of the cultural prohibition.

"I cannot give mine," Aris shook his head categorically.

"Then simply describe it. How does it alter it?"

"In a sense, to the opposite," Aris replied, failing to find a way to construct a more definite phrase.

"Do you mean to say that this object thinks?" Seraphinus doubted the plausibility of the charron's words.

Without accounting to himself why he was doing so, Aris endeavored to cool Seraphinus's attention toward this property of the barrel organ:

"I think that in order to invert an already nebulous meaning, one need not think. One hundred and eight pictures, the interconnections are typical. It will be little more complex than a mechanical harpsichord."

"You are right. Well then, let me now think. Is there truly no instructions in that little book?"

"I told you, it is not from here. See for yourself," Aris handed him the book.

Seraphinus leafed through it and returned it. It was obvious that his head was occupied with something else: he was masking with all his might his desire to know whence Aris had the barrel organ. The charron resolved not to tempt fate:

"A formal bargain?"

"Well, spit it out," Seraphinus said expectantly.

"A firmabider's tether is needed," Aris shook his head.

"I am a firmabider myself. Down where you live, outside the towns, do the owners of thread shops not hold such rights?"

"They do," Aris agreed. "I give you the opportunity to satisfy your curiosity, and you do not attempt to deprive me of the barrel organ, you hold your tongue, and you do not pry into whence it came to me. Should I find it necessary—I shall tell you. Such is the bargain. Do you agree?"

"I agree," Seraphinus shook Aris's hand.

By this moment the shadows on the wall had shifted, owing to the altered balance of light streams, and now the "scales" were in a position of obvious imbalance. "What the bramble!" a thought stole unbidden into the charron's head. He reflected that it had been an exceptional piece of folly to hide that barter-device in the deepest pocket without having read it. Of course, he had secretly hoped that Prithrea had written something particular for him. "Enough, it is time," he resolved. The secret he had created for himself was drawn into the uneven light of the room in a half-instant. He attempted to read, or rather to comprehend, what a sequence of thirteen pictures signified. At first it seemed to him exceedingly complex, for the standard syntax permitted no sense to be composed. Then, with horror, he understood that the rules for composing meaningful images among the picture-predicates had simply been breached.

What was this? Nonsense? After three or four heartbeats of mounting panic, he recalled the obvious: sometimes, or rather—extremely rarely, each of the pictures simply stands for one of the letters, digits, or punctuation marks. He first assured himself of the soundness of his guess by verifying that there were no "superfluous" pictures. There were one hundred and eight in all, and the total number of letters and other signs was considerably smaller. The hypothesis proved potentially viable. With the utmost caution in his mind he composed the message: "dislctionhere." Here? Already here?! A technical statement of some fact? What had she wished to say? Does he who forbids cracks create catastrophe? Does life begin where there is a defect? Is dislocation not a sickness, but the capacity to be flexible? Is one person's crack not necessarily a crack for all? Violence as the last refuge of incompetence? It no longer mattered. What mattered was that this had no relation at all to Aris himself.

Aris would have spat on the floor, had he been well-bred.

From outside, from the street, the border guard's voice rang out: "Archer. Hey, archer."

"Wish me luck," said the charron, and went out. "Please do not leave until I or my neighbor return. His name is Haakon the Good."

Seraphinus ignored the charron's remark, being absorbed in the device and the map.

Aris wrote a note about Seraphinus for the former priest and left it on the little table in the antechamber. This precaution was by no means a guarantee that Haakon, returning home, would not first hack the guest with his black sword and only afterward read the message.

"Ah, yes," Aris returned to Seraphinus for an instant. "Here is my barter-device for you. Experiment to your heart's content."

And he went outside, leaving the engineer alone with the barrel organ.

⁂

The small border guard, shifting from foot to foot at the threshold, greeted him with half-uttered words: "What took you so long?"

"Lead on," Aris said simply, setting off at a brisk pace toward the embankment, since that was in any case the sole exit from the stone outcropping upon which this quarter, the guest house, and the two of them along with it stood.

"You're in a hurry for nothing," said the boy walking behind. "The contest has been put off till tomorrow. You won't make it before dark now. But we've collected all the wagers. I sorted out the people."

"Is that so," the charron halted. "And where is Madam Ratu?"

"Went off somewhere. Paid me for my services, charged me to warn you, and went off. By the way, I saw that dandy of yours there."

"The optician Jinngo?"

"Uh-huh. Was placing bets."

"Did you warn him not to wager on my victory?"

"I didn't."

"And did the Judge see him?"

"How should I know."

"True enough," Aris said. "Tell me, have you heard of the Flood in the lower lands? About half a year back."

"We are little interested in your affairs here. Especially if they be not the deeds of men."

"Understood. Well, farewell, Lariel. Thank you for your help."

The lad vanished at once, and the charron went to the library. How long may one endure this absence of Card-Panso, one might ask.

⁂

Reaching the library by the shortest route—and by now a rather fair map of the settlement had formed in Aris's head—he came, as expected, up against a closed door. But this evening, such an obstacle was laughable. With a scarcely noticeable effort, the hunchfront brought the door off its hinges with a thrust of his misshapen keel.

The room was not large, and the charron swiftly appraised the scale of the catastrophe. Many shelves were empty. In the aisle stood a cart onto which volumes had been heaped in disorder. It was obvious that over the last couple of days—more precisely, nights—books had been removed from the building. Aris found the majordomo in the far room. In the service closet the picture prompted still fewer questions. Several bottles lay on the floor. Card-Panso sprawled on a couch, dead to the world. The close reek of a body drunk to the extreme hung in the air.

"Did you sell books to the brown smugglers, you bastard?" Aris shook the former majordomo mercilessly. "You promised me, you scum. 'Till the coffin plank,' you said."

Somehow Card-Panso dragged his eyes open. Pushing the charron away, he hobbled to a vat of water, dipped a ladle, and began to drink. Then he sank back onto the couch. Partly regaining consciousness, he declared:

"That wench was trailing you for a long time. That's why I began to keep an eye out. I arranged the commission for the stead for you. I hired players to paint the scenery, so you'd take a picture on canvas for a house from afar."

"What are you driveling? What wench?"

Card-Panso rose with difficulty, lit a small lamp, and set it upon the headboard of his berth.

"Prithrea," he croaked at last.

The charron stood up and, with a calibrated hook from above, returned the majordomo to unconsciousness. He himself walked out of the building at an unhurried pace. Then, with a powerful thrust of his unnatural arms and chest, he rammed the door back into the frame, where it stuck fast, compressed by monstrous friction.

He walked down the street. Toward the embankment. In the window of the abandoned library, the curtain blazed.

⁂

Turning from the embankment onto the stone outcropping, Aris spotted one of the black ones. The man was approaching their house. The charron broke into a run and caught him by the elbow just at the door.

"There. Two melons' weight," said the chief's underling. "The address and the man's name are inside. Two days you have. Thereafter blame yourselves."

He handed over a parcel unexpectedly small for such a weight and was gone. The charron was itching to engage in wrangling, but he could not find cause swiftly enough. The smuggler, moreover, was plainly hurrying and gave no chance to be hooked. Aris spat after him and entered the chambers. The door stood open. Haakon was neither in the parlor nor in his room. Aris tossed the parcel with the contraband onto his bed. It creaked and sagged.

The engineer was not in the chambers either. Nor was the Judge, though she had no business being here in the first place.

The barrel organ, the Forebears be praised, was in place. In its unfolded state. His barter-device lay upon it. The metal inside the barrel organ no longer gleamed. Had Seraphinus somehow switched it off? Or had it done so itself?

The book, too, lay where the charron had left it—on the little table.

The charron stepped out of the chambers into the street, locked the door, and went over to the optician Jinngo's lodgings. Quiet there too, and, it seemed, empty. But locked, at least.

Aris returned home, attempted to find something edible, and found nothing. He cursed aloud that the Judge had spent the last of the bread and butter to put on a show for the engineer.

He went to the barrel organ and began folding it back to its former state. Unexpectedly easily… he succeeded. He packed the book in its envelope back inside.

Then he overturned his bed. With four powerful blows he broke off its legs. He pushed the barrel organ against the wall. He set the base of the bed upon it. He lay down on top, without undressing and without even removing his scabbard. By some incredible means, this entire construction, including his preposterous keel, remained in balance.

Aris fell into a peaceful slumber to the frantic clangor of the fire bells.

¶

Fragment 41. The Counterfeit of the Ultimate Day

¶

From the window, through which shone the sky of Avertigus and the reflection of its light off the water's surface, a chill wafted. Like home. But no. Aris was not at home—in the window loomed the dark silhouette of the border-guard boy.

"What are you doing there?" the charron came fully awake. He rose, opened the window, and let the boy inside. The air outside was quite brisk.

"You need to come out this way too, master. Through the window," said the lad. "They're waiting for you behind the door."

"Who is it? The black ones?" the charron grew alarmed. "They'd have broken in. The brown ones?"

"The ordinary folk. Nasty rumors about all of you have been going round since the night."

"You think they'll give me a beating?" Aris did not immediately ask what the rumors were.

"Nah," the boy shook his head. "First they'll pick a quarrel, then they'll start doggin' you, and then they'll smash the barrel organ."

It is wrong to suppose, the charron reflected, that pain is an inner impulse only for living, mobile creatures. He was certain that the barrel organ, incapable of running away, could not do without pain. Life feeds on life—an immutable law of danger. It must feel it.

"What are they saying on the streets?"

"Card-Panso set fire to the library and ran. The brown ones gathered up the wager money and vanished too. There won't be any contest. Card-Panso was seen at some point with the brown ones. Jinngo wagered a pile of coins on you yesterday and was braggin' about it in the taverns. He egged a lot of folk into placing bets—he was telling everyone what an archer you are."

The charron grunted with comprehension.

"And the Judge?"

"Poorly, master. My fault. One man… through whom I passed a bet to be placed… slandered her."

"And Armoor?"

"Not a peep about him. For now. Not many know you're acquainted. He's respectable."

"And me?"

"Well, you're the marksman," the boy said, astonished at Aris's obtuseness. "So you're the main one."

"Right, right," the charron grew somber. A shudder ran through him from the cold.

"And a freak besides," Lariel added, ever a precise informant.

"And why…," the charron was about to ask the reason for the brown smugglers' flight, but then realized that since the nocturnal book-thieving sessions had suddenly become impossible, everything thereafter had gone off plan, and perhaps outside any logic at all.

But the boy answered even this as-yet-unasked question:

"Because it's cold. It hasn't been as cold as today for about forty years. So the old folk say. Fashion ribbons out of your sheets, master. We'll lower your barrel organ down. There's a boat under the window."

"A boat!" Aris bustled. "Why didn't you say so? A boat is good."

He cautiously peered out the window to gauge the height of the wall and the boat itself.

"Where do we hide?"

"In the byre for now, where else," said the boy.

"And why are you helping us?"

"I'll go with you to the lower lands," the little border guard determined the plans for the whole group.

'Every man ought to experience a flight out a window at least once in his life,' thought Aris, embarking upon his first time.

⁂

"Keep your head down," said the boy, taking up the oars.

When you lie on the bottom of a boat with part of your body in stale cold water, your grasp of life expands. The slime on the boat's bottom, such an understanding arrives, is not "filth." It is a most complex living community with thousands of organisms in every scoop of green muck. Its members, one must suppose, warn one another of danger, jointly rear their offspring. It is foolish to suppose that such a stinking thing thinks of nothing.

The boat's progress along the lake shore was very slow—Lariel's hands did not possess the strength of his mind. Each stroke came hard to him. Slowness creates time. Free time often encourages an exchange of thoughts.

"Haakon told me that he and Armoor tamed the reptile yesterday. Through guts," the boy reported.

"Whose guts?" asked the charron, in order to begin clarifying something.

"Deer guts. They breathed into 'em together, like a pipe. The other end they shoved down the reptile's gullet so he'd grow used to the mixed scent. They breathed all day. Then Armoor breathed alone. So the beast would grow used to his scent."

The oarlocks creaked a full five times, and the charron had to repeat his question to the boy, who had fallen silent.

"I'm puzzled, Lariel. What the bramble for would anyone pump a pterodactyl full of an armorer's exhalations?"

"He's going to fly on him to Volmelftstein. Astride."

The charron's chest ceased fitting below the waterline; he raised himself up.

"Lie down, or I'll clout you with the oar."

"Ah. So that's their plan," Aris said slowly and, at this stage, refrained from judging Haakon's scheme. Whose else could it be? Haakon's, of course.

The boy caught that a reappraisal of the former priest was occurring in Aris's head:

"Haakon has stayed true to the old faith," Lariel said gravely. "He wants to turn everything back."

"But does the byre with the reptile stand right on the shore?" asked Aris, to dodge a theological conversation.

"All the stalls are by the water, master. How else to wash the beasts," the lad reasonably informed him. "We have a saying: 'Cleanliness could not enter the temple. She entered the byre, for there was room there.'"

Aris wished to express respect for religious sentiments with a courteous nod of the head, but his flat posture on the boat's bottom prevented it.

"You think they won't find us there, my dear border guard?"

"In some palace they'd be searching for you. A palace reeks of power. Reeks of money. Of iktiket."

"Etiquette."

"But a byre, what? Empty of everything. There's no meaning laid up in a byre. Shove yourself inside. Shove whatever you like inside. Shove away, all you want."

The charron continued his recumbent journey and did not react to Lariel's words.

"And they ain't searching for you anyway. The foolish ones are slandering you. And even they think you've fled in the night," the boy added, sensing that his words about the aesthetics of humility before circumstance had not in the least calmed the man on the boat's bottom. "You're not criminals of any sort. Just devils on a black catafalque."

"Where, by the way, is the carriage?" Aris suddenly grew alarmed.

"Armoor asked the smith to stow it behind a hayheap in the byre. It's all well. But there's one hitch, master. They won't be givin' out fodder for the reptile. By the papers, he don't exist anymore."

"How's that?"

"I forged 'em."

"Can you write, too?"

"I told you: I forg 'em. I can forge 'em, I can't write. And you've got no horses either. Or any other ridin' beasts."

"Listen, Lariel. How do you know everything? How old are you, anyway?"

"Had anyone been around to count my years, I wouldn't be fussin' about with you here or patrolling the empty heaths; I'd be gobblin' sweetmeats. Where do they gather the likes of you. All fools, to a man. The Judge, an old woman as she

is, and she's some sort of feebleminded too. Soon as I reach the towns with you lot..."

The border guard would have grumbled endlessly, so Aris interjected:

"What do you need the city for?"

"What business is it of yours?"

The charron was satisfied with this clarification of the situation. Right up until their arrival, they sailed in silence to the steady slaps of the oars.

⁂

The boat came to rest at a sprawling, uneven landing. More precisely, it was not a boat dock but a platform down which the animals were led to be washed. The smell from the wooden structure, which over many years had soaked up a great deal of everything, was unpleasant.

The stalls were situated at the very edge of Haven. No people were to be seen about.

"Who's inside?" asked Aris.

"Who do you think," the boy grumbled. "Everybody. Ratu, first off. The old woman wouldn't let me sleep this night; she asked me to find everyone. Haakon was sleepin' here anyway, keepin' watch over his reptile. Jinngo ought to be here—I took a long local cloak with a hood to his house so he could sneak here by himself. It's only you that can't be hid with clothing. With your hump. How do you even live with such a thing. See, I had to drag you out after everyone. And that barrel organ of yours—I barely managed to row. What have you stuffed inside it, it warped the whole boat. Gold, is it?"

"And Armoor?"

"He's out getting fodder."

"And Seraphinus? From the thread shop?"

"No such order was given," Lariel cut short.

The first thing Aris encountered in the barn was warmth. Genuine, deep warmth of an ancient beast. This was astonishing. The building, though crooked in its walls, was so vast that calling it a stall or a byre was difficult. High walls like in a temple. The roof—like an overturned vessel.

"Can you fetch Seraphinus? Please," Aris asked the boy. The archer earnestly laid his hand to his chest: "I am already safe. I thank you heartily."

The border guard nodded and evaporated. His words and deeds parted company, in a good sense.

"Out of favor again?" Aris's greeting rang in a sinister, even spiteful tone.

"The best place of all where we've already been outcasts," the Judge said optimistically. "We share the warmth with a fine reptile. The stone warmth of a fire is not so reliable, it turns out."

"We have descended to the level of beasts," Jinngo added to the picture.

"It is not degradation, but a return to the source," Ratu objected didactically. "We warm ourselves with the breath of life itself."

"But a straw throne won't be pressing upon your back, Jinngo," Haakon added.

"Catch, Haakon," Aris tossed him the parcel from the black smugglers. "We have a day and a half left. Or something of the sort."

The priest undid the cargo in a flash. Inside proved to be three long chains. Upon a hasty inspection, it became clear they were gold, silver, and platinum.

"Oho," Haakon weighed the contraband in his hands dreamily. "Maybe we could light out for Volkarium? Start buildin' our own haven with this money—in the good old Faith."

"What do you need that for?" Aris asked rudely.

"I'm plumb weary of roamin'. Why, even the beast's manger is empty."

"A house is not a place, dear Haakon; it is a state," the Judge began to reconcile and instruct everybody, sensing the mounting tension. "The moment you stop seeking your own haven, it will at once disappear."

"If only Avertigus could have your words in his ears. But he paid no heed even to your verdict, let alone idle chatter. So stop your chattering—all of you," Aris was rude once more. "You give some answers before the question has even been asked."

Fortunately, at that moment a cart rolled into the barn. It was pushed—with enormous effort—by Armoor. In the cart reposed an enormous pumpkin.

"I'm unable to buy any fodder at all," he reported, streaming with sweat. "They make you verify your coins. The people from the Chancellery inspect every one.

Trade has halted. I really cannot understand what they want or what they hope to achieve by it. Here and there, petty disturbances. The shops are mostly closed. Queues. I saw two brawls. A vast sum has gone missing. The participation in the contest of a professional from the lower lands, it turns out, caused a veritable furor. Gambling has never led anyone to good."

All watched with reverent horror as the mighty Jinngo, at the silent request of the hapless armorer, laid his progeny into the manger.

Still greater horror was struck into everyone by the lightning speed with which the reptile devoured the magnificent work of farmer's art.

"How are you?" the Judge asked with sympathy.

"Could I but use my pain as fuel. But as it is..." Armoor waved a hand, crushed. "While a pumpkin weighs like a melon, it is food. But mine was architecture. Well then... the high becomes low. And the low—high."

"It's nothing. My throne, now, stands in dung," Jinngo clumsily encouraged the armorer. "It's good, in any case, that nobody is watching here. In Parliament, it was filthier, if you stop to think."

Together with the pumpkin, Armoor had also brought human food. Having paid due tribute to the sacral moment, the people gradually fell to their meal. This considerably improved the emotional atmosphere.

⁂

Lariel came back empty-handed. Or rather—empty of anyone.

"He refused," the boy announced. "Your engineer. I won't go, he says."

"How did he refuse?" Aris, for some reason, had not expected such a wholly probable outcome. "Why?"

"He says that space arises from within. As if, 'I am making it for Avertigus.' I especially made an effort to remember that drivel. I knew you'd ask."

This time, everyone had to be infused with sympathy for the next victim of circumstances—the charron with his dashed hopes. Aloud, however, no one ventured to cheer him up.

And it was not needed.

Seraphinus himself soon appeared on the threshold.

"You changed your mind?" Aris asked darkly.

The engineer was in yesterday's shirt. His face was swollen. On the whole, he looked unwell.

"I was afraid that an attempt to explain would be a distortion more perilous than silence."

"There's no need to explain. There's a need to do," Aris proposed a way out of the situation. "We must deliver a message to Avertigus. That's all! Judge, please set forth the text of your verdict to the esteemed Seraphinus. Let our friend the engineer consider, drawing upon his knowledge, how to deliver it. Jinngo, be so kind as to initiate Seraphinus into the essence of your notion about tickling Avertigus with a long bridge-chord. And I, with your permission, shall rest."

He clicked the rapier a couple of times in the scabbard behind his back, sat down on the straw, and leaned against the wall.

¶

Fragment 42. The Riveting of the Message-Chain

¶

They woke the charron with a most unpleasant request.

"We'd be needin' yer scabbard, master," Haakon bent over him. "The special one there, the one on yer torso."

"What in the world for?" Aris was taken aback.

Just then he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, some enormous beasts.

"Diligent Forebears," he jumped up in fright. "Who in blazes are those?"

"Never seen a giant ridin' hound before, master?" Haakon laid a steadying hand on the charron's arm. "There now, ease up..."

"Seen them, of course," Aris calmed down. "But never so close. And never all at once. And why are there three of them? And what the bramble are they doing in this climate? And where did you get them?"

Haakon began ticking off his fingers:

"First off, we need somethin' to ride. And we couldn't buy nothin' else. Seraphinus bought 'em. Gratitude to him."

"No need to thank me," Seraphinus responded, having overheard the conversation. "I'll sell the house and the Armoor garden when it all settles down, recoup my costs, and the remainder of the money will await you with me or my heir—rest assured."

Haakon nodded gravely, as if he himself were the chief party to large commercial dealings.

"Second off," he continued, "three—'cause there was three of 'em. That's why no one bought 'em before us. Can't leave just one, right? He'd pine away. I've a feelin' three is even better than two or four."

"They simply refused to sell them separately," Seraphinus revealed the real state of affairs.

Haakon folded down another finger.

"Third off, here they're cheap, but in the cold lands, down in the delta... there they cost dear."

"And what would you want with the delta, Forebears forgive me?" Aris was genuinely astonished.

"Should we happen to be carried that way," Haakon answered vaguely. "Fourth off, there ain't no bridles for wyverns. I reckon nobody ever flew 'em under saddle before..."

"Children, as it happens, did fly them," Seraphinus objected. "There are such accounts in our books."

"There were accounts," Haakon cracked an ill-omened imitation. "Anyhow, master, we can't commission a bridle right now. I had a look, sized it up. Seems to me the wyvern's neck and your torso are about the same girth. Eh?"

'Only yesterday,' Aris thought, 'I would've dragged you about by your old curls for a remark like that.' But today his reaction was different:

"Take it," he began pulling the scabbard off himself, having first drawn the rapier.

"And the rapier is needed too," Seraphinus interjected. "For experiments."

Aris passed the rapier to Seraphinus, hand to hand, and felt no sense of loss whatsoever.

⁂

The barrel organ was once again in its "workbench" position. The naked rapier lay at the edge. Seraphinus had adapted an upturned bucket for himself as a stool. Using the small vise built into the workbench, he was assembling, link by link, a single chain out of the three smugglers' chains. A golden link at times followed a silver one, at other times—two platinum ones, and sometimes three golden links occurred in a row. Everyone crowded in a semicircle around Seraphinus, watching his work. It did not disconcert him in the slightest.

"I simply cannot grasp the pattern," Jinngo said. "What's the meaning of such a design? Or what is it?"

"The creator of this device," Seraphinus patted the workbench with his palm, "was trying to speak with Avertigus. This contraption is not at all for inverting the meaning of the barter-devices, no. This mechanism translates ordinary

speech into something comprehensible to Avertigus. And He understands only three letters."

Everyone exchanged glances, trying to gauge how to appraise such an accusation. One could scarcely conceive of a more refined insult to Avertigus. Such a denigration of the capacity for thought. Only three letters! Was it conceivable?!

"And which letters, precisely, are those?" the judge asked with caution. She endeavored to steer the conversation in a rational course, but was not certain that this question of hers would not be taken as an endorsement of the hypothesis of the Universe's cretinism. On the other hand, she had no wish to quarrel with Seraphinus, who had helped them greatly with transport. She secretly hoped that the absurdity of his answer would by itself expose the overreaching engineer.

"'True,' 'False,' 'Unknown.' Those are the letters."

The judge fell to thinking. She sensed at once that such a description fundamentally altered the matter. Here, indeed, one might discern cosmic wisdom.

"So, this will be a phrase? A suit and a verdict? Are you proposing we tickle the bridge with a chain of three metals?"

"Precisely so. It must be laid along the bridge. The sparklettes will flow. Avertigus will see the pattern. So I believe."

"Chaos frightens. Complex order—delights," the judge pronounced.

"A pattern can be beautiful," Seraphinus agreed. "That is a good thing: the world is not random."

"I ain't hearin' the click of cutters right now, but a liturgy," Haakon watched the proceedings, spellbound.

"A causal chain can be rewarding," Armoor did not remain aloof.

Aris, however, was not so sanguine:

"What makes you think this thing is for composing messages to Avertigus? Maybe some criminals simply scrambled their words so the prosecution at trial would have nothing to present?"

"This was unquestionably made for Avertigus!"

"Well, justify it then," the charron delivered his demand sullenly.

Seraphinus was in no way thrown off by Aris's unpleasant tone.

"By means of hidden marks on the map, I managed to understand that the messages of three letters are always tied to five cycles within the day. The resonance-consonance of the sparklettes that attract metal—that's one. The inaudible ringing of the Cylinder—that's two. The pulsation of the water level in the sea. The velocity of the upper winds. The fifth I could not grasp what it pertains to. But it exists."

"So?" Aris did not see the connection.

"Do you have a wife?" Seraphinus asked.

"No."

"Well, if you did... And you would pick your moment before a conversation: so she wasn't hungry, wasn't itchy anywhere. Had a good night's sleep. And so on... Before speaking with whom would you prepare in such a manner?"

"Well, it could be anyone..." the charron was loath to admit he was wrong.

"You know that I am right," Seraphinus ended the dispute on that topic.

'The whole town has bought tickets to a jolly performance,' the engineer thought silently, dividing and reforging the links of the precious chain. 'And only one actor knows that the play may bring down the theater.'

"And what if He does not answer?" Aris felt irritation and was frantically searching for a place and a way to channel it.

"The law protects the individual right to silence," the judge hurried to Seraphinus's aid. "But who shall protect the right of all others to understand?"

At last Seraphinus completed the manufacture of the chain. He placed it back into the pouch, assured himself that the note with the address was in place, and handed it to Armoor:

"You might memorize the contacts, just in case," he recommended. "And the chain, in your place, I would coil around myself, under my clothes."

Armoor did precisely so, shocking everyone with the sight of his inconceivably gaunt and bony body.

"We must hurry," Jinngo fretted, "you still have to persuade Virgilia, to bore the holes in the ground."

"He won't make it in time," Seraphinus said calmly. "And there is no need. On the bridge, if it truly is entirely metallic, there is already the requisite tension. Fly straight to the bridge."

"It's metallic, sure enough," Jinngo nodded.

"Then set out," Aris commanded.

Armoor climbed lightly onto the wyvern and seated himself in an ordinary donkey saddle, fitted between the wings.

"What shall I tell the smugglers at the other end?" Armoor asked, holding the reins. "How to explain that the chain has been reworked?"

"Say nothing," Aris said. "No one will ever conceive that you did it. Let them sort it out among themselves later."

"And thereby we shall sow discord there," the judge stated with sadness.

Haakon led the saddled wyvern out into the street. Everyone filed out after them.

⁂

The wyvern, with its rider on its back, began its run-up, picked up speed, leaped. And did not take wing. Armoor turned it by a pull of the reins. At a walk, returned it to the starting point. Another run-up. The same result, with the sole exception that it was worse still—from the accumulated weariness in the legs.

"Told ya, bunch o' fools," the lad pronounced.

"The wings are weak," Jinngo said.

"Too heavy for the sky, loaded with earth," Haakon said.

"The weight exceeds the lift," Seraphinus said.

"The excess weight—is unworked-off debts," Ratu said.

The charron put an end to the discussion:

"We go to the grotto, there are steps there leading up to the cliff's edge. The nearest suitable place. From the crag it'll take its start."

"Death at the start," Lariel said.

"The risk of one-shotness," Jinngo said.

"The goal matters more than the pilot," Haakon blurted.

"A false springboard," Seraphinus pronounced.

"Compensation of inner inability by outer catastrophe," the judge pronounced.

"He who fears the abyss ought not to fly," Armoor ended the dispute.

Aris, however, had his doubts:

"Taking off from the edge is easy. Landing on the plain to rest—that is the challenge."

"He'll fly over the water, along the right bank of the River," the boy said. "The bank is high, there are cliffs there."

"How do you know that?"

"From the smugglers."

"It's decided," Armoor said, "I'll fly above the water. I shan't lose my way!"

"Fly low," Jinngo said, "and you won't be dashed to pieces."

"Flying along the river is three times as far; you won't make it in time," the charron once more voiced his concern.

"And maybe there's no need to make it in time," Haakon declared lightmindedly.

"And what of the threats and the penalty?" the judge asked.

"What fools," the boy said. "How are they gonna know down there, when the bag was handed over?"

"A pigeon?"

"Extra expenses."

"I refuse to believe this is on trust."

"The note about the deadline is hidden in the bag," the lad said. "The recipients will be the ones to impose the penalty."

"In that case, I've left the bag entirely here," Armoor said.

"That's what I'm sayin': fools. Let's forge the deadline. The bag must be handed over. It's part of the cargo."

"Search the bag for the hidden message," Aris ordered with irritation. "Repackage it."

"Found it, master."

"Well then, forge it. Outfit the kola. Harness the hounds. I'll rest a while. Something's been off with me since morning."

⁂

The black kola on its triangular rollers moved along the shore road toward the grotto. The charron ruled the driver's box. The boy sat beside him—for the pleasure and the speed-borne breeze. The rest rode inside. Among them, Seraphinus. Jinngo sat at his right hand. The wyvern flew somewhere above them with a long line about its neck. It was not tethered. There was no need for that—it and Haakon had found a common tongue long before the end of the journey from the lowlands to Haven.

When the settlement and its outskirts had vanished from sight, a dust-clot began to overtake the carriage. A party of riders pursued them. The charron quickened the pace, but the three giant hounds had not been bred in these lands. They began to tire. Aris turned off the road and drove on away from the lake, straight across the rocky waste. The triangular rollers coped. The soft pads of the dogs—also. For a time, this maneuver increased the distance. In a few minutes, however, the hunters drew so close that the words in their shouting became distinguishable:

"Dry your oars, Hunchfront, else we start shooting your doggies."

In confirmation of their intention, pistol shots rang out.

"Slide the window-slits down," Aris commanded with a crisp but quiet cry. "On my command 'hotz,' raise the slits. The same—in the event of my death or wounding. On that same command, Haakon—make the wyvern fly over me. I don't care how—make it happen!!! Engage in no talk!"

After several heartbeats, the black carriage came to a halt. Sixteen riders in garments of a predominantly brown color surrounded it. A dozen double-barreled wheel-lock pistols were aimed at the kola.

Their representative was… Seraphinus found it hard to choose a word, a stern sort of fellow… and all over in boils… It seemed to him that the man was even now squeezing boils out of himself.

"What d'you want?" the charron threw at him.

"Did our quaint attention languish you and your folk?" the bandit asked with a cadaverous grin. "Has my voice not resounded in your souls?"

"We have nothing that was or is yours."

"I believe you, like my own kin," the cadaverous one tittered.

"I'm asking you once more: what is it you want?"

'There was, in none of their grimaces, their gestures, their retorts, the slightest awkwardness, those constant little displays we are so accustomed to in ordinary life,' Seraphinus understood. 'Upon every bandit mug was depicted so much dignity that none of us knows anything at all about such a quantity.'

"What we want," the representative leered. "Where to begin? He who witnessed this has spoken. That Garment-Panso of yours left the job undone. Vanished somewhere. Spoiled the goods. Who answers for him? Hunchfront. Now Armoor. Bertha, Sarah, Rebecca, Adele, Anna, and Ida. Eh? Did you kill? You did. Our man wasn't sure at first it was you. But later we were convinced. No one else has such whorishly gaudy clothes. Not on this side of the mountains. Haakon. You're helping the Blacks, our eternal rivals. Jinngo. This void-chancellor we'll simply take. We'll collect a ransom. Ratu. Did she cheat against us? She did. What else? Ah, yes. The cargo of drugs, metals. That's ours. Ours now. And now your wagon here's needed—such fine triangular wheels. Seraphinus and Lariel we'll punish for abetting."

One of them, as if suddenly, as if just awakened, began to snap his fingers, legs planted wide, and bounce with his upper torso.

The dame with the crooked cheek straightened up and stretched out her hand… Suddenly, some incredible transaction occurred in her eyes: she abruptly raised a switch… And a sharp blow was heard. A welt blazed scarlet upon the lad's neck. She slowly lowered the switch, approached Lariel, and licked his blood off.

"Well, well, what a little morsel," a mocking female voice sounded from behind her contorted cheek. "Thus endeth our suffering!"

A mirthless chuckle rippled across the mouths and heads of the bandits.

"At the golden hour of reckoning, sure as sure, a-comin' it is," one of the throats produced.

Aris's people were benumbed. Their lips were mute. Their conscience was silent.

"And let's have no violence, Hunchfront. Else who'll rear your wee children, eh? Avertigus, maybe?" the representative of the browns fabricated a revolting sally about the passing of responsibility.

Aris turned black. His chest caved inward.

The insulting truth of human nature lies in the fact that one's inner reason begins to act before one has time to decide whether one wishes to act.

"Pity hath not been enjoined upon us. Nor hath grinning scorn been enjoined upon us," Hunchfront spoke leadenly. "But love for every finger of dust hath been enjoined, for every womb. And for the fruit of every womb—pity. But if justice there was, then dust into thee! Thy glorious name is incorruptible! Tempt not my will! Ready thyself!"

"Hotz!"

The black carriage went instantly blind with vanished windows. Across the bowman's face the line, tearing through the sky, lashed with a rustle and a long wave. With a lightning wrench of his arm, Aris whipped the end of it about his wrist, yanked with all his might, and bellowed, trying to frighten the wyvern. The beast, indeed, took fright, heaved upward, and snatched Aris from the box. The creature, of course, could not carry off a man who was anything but light. The charron did not need it to. He soared up, then began descending together with the wyvern, and at a certain moment let go the line and landed, turning over upon his hump. The leap upon a rope in the blink of an eye created a distance between him and the villains, who stood benumbed by the carriage. A hundred and fifty paces lay between them.

A disorderly shooting broke out at the carriage and at the charron. The bullets bounced off the carriage. And shooting at the charron with pistols at such a distance was useless. Half the malefactors were armed with large bows. The bows came into play. A tricky business, to strike a man with an arrow from afar.

The charron took up a calm stance. In the minute that followed, an extermination took place. Aris caught an arrow, an instant later it cleaved the throat of one of the browns, adorning the victim's clothing with a second hue—bordeaux. He caught an arrow, greeted it—and it, in answer to his greeting, sliced open the flesh of the next villain. He invited a new arrow into flight, and the reprisal continued.

After the third corpse, some bandits did bolt toward Aris, to close the distance or even to enter melee. Yet they quickly understood that this merely changed the number of their turn in the inexorable sequence of deaths. To a nearer number. At ten corpses, the remaining six near-corpses took to their heels in the direction of the road. But what is two hundred paces to a charron of the highest

grade? Three hundred paces. The appetite for bloodling comes during the shedding of blood—that is all.

When all the bandits had become meat for vultures, the charron decided to assist the birds. He returned to the carriage, commanded Haakon to take his rapier from Seraphinus and flick its tip sideways. Then Haakon methodically minced all sixteen bodies to a state of total unrecognizability by the void abiding along the blade of the rapier. All that occurred in those minutes, until the rapier was restored to him, proved incomprehensible to Seraphinus.

The horses had scattered. Seraphinus realized they had several hours before a chase would be sent after them. This time of a hundred riders.

The people spilled from the carriage. By what miracle Lariel, who lay in the driver's box, had not been struck by a bullet remained unknown. But he too, in the uttermost confusion, descended and set foot on solid ground.

Aris froze in the midst of them all, to let his thought find its resolution.

¶

Fragment 43. A Random Heap of Excreta

¶

The terrified hounds repaid evil with good: they delivered the black carriage to the needed crag in the shortest possible time. The looming ascent seemed to Seraphinus, who had never been here, a kind of ascesis of the stone step. It would, he hoped, allow him not to think of the nightmare they had lived through or the responsibility for it yet to come. His technical mind sought an energetic conversion of physical effort into a surrogate of repentance. He hoped that the pain in his muscles might buy off the pain of conscience.

"I love supremely honest bargains," Jinngo said. "Voluntary pain in the calves in exchange for a splendid view."

"We'll puff a bit from the strain now, and puff out all the bad," Lariel said.

"As if you need fret, with your weight—bodily or sinful," Haakon sighed.

"What's this, you blue-gray curl—have you taken it into your head to accuse us and yourself of such a primitive attempt to flee from sin?" Ratu grumbled. "If anyone rolls stones uphill, it's only the smugglers."

"Your business right now is to watch your footing," Aris said sharply, pointing a finger at the unreliability of the steps crumbling here and there. "No need to look up."

The wyvern, helping itself with half-beats of its black-green webbed wings, clambered along somehow behind the file of people ascending to the grotto by the stone stairs. Haakon had not managed to explain to it that it simply needed to fly up and land on the ledge before the grotto's entrance. However, when they had climbed to the very top, the creature's stubbornness found explanation—to land here without grazing a wing on the overhanging vault was impossible.

Soon Armoor was once more mounted, strapped to the saddle. Beneath the saddle was lashed the pouch of the black smugglers. The wyvern puffed and snorted but did not balk or buck. It was plain that the prospect of leaping from the cliff was clear to it, and it found nothing bad in it. Haakon began to whine

in public. He expounded that it was a shame he hadn't given his friend a name, that it ought to have been him flying, that "we didn't know what we were doing."

The white cut of the hill dropped into the water almost sheer. The green of the mixed grasses on the undulating plateau around them attuned one to a long flight over waters that might grow rough. The limestone cliffs glittered in the light of Avertigus's sky like bright chalk. It was growing cold. Perhaps because of this, despite the enormous distance, the source of the River was perfectly visible on the rising wall of the Cylinder.

"I once heard a saying," Armoor spoke thoughtfully, "that a great sphere can only be dissolved in a plane. You know... I think the pumpkin itself will soon pass judgment."

The judge and the charron exchanged glances: 'Is our messenger sound of mind?'

"Hell for a creature is when everyone around is other. She was the only one of her kind. To be herself became unbearable to her, but to renounce herself was also impossible..."

Aris grew seriously worried for the pilot's mental readiness for flight, and so he cut short the old man's musings:

"Everything will go off perfectly. Haakon, give the command."

"Wait, Aris," the old man held him back by the arm. Then Armoor drew the charron's head close by the collar: "I want to make you a gift of a little cane—in case you start limping. Only if you start limping. Now we can. I'm giving it not because I wish to give. My little bird doesn't care for it. I'm giving it to you not because you're the chief. You're not the chief. But because, formally, you're still a cripple—you need it more. Well, fare you well, my dear one. And one more thing..."

The old man was saying something else to Aris, something Seraphinus could not make out. Haakon whistled. The wyvern crouched.

But only so as to copiously empty its bowels onto the flat stones. An enormous, vivid orange stain formed, with a multitude of black flecks.

After that, the nameless pterodactyl leaped downward and spread its wings. The wyvern's flight quickly straightened out; the creature with its rider smoothly descended, flying along an even straight line, hugged almost tight to the water, and flew on like a winged mastless yacht.

Aris pulled the judge aside. They started arguing fiercely about something. Only the charron's furious hissing could be made out. "He said it can turn into anything, provided there are two witnesses." "So you've read all about those clocks, so what? You're scared for nothing, old woman." "Jinngo will confirm it—his word doesn't count for anything anyway, you said so yourself in that ruling."

"They'll be there by morning," Lariel assessed the flight speed with surprise. "But what a mess it made! You couldn't draw something like that on purpose."

The word "on purpose" cut Seraphinus's ear. On purpose? Trying not to pay attention to the smell, he peered closely at the flat pool of excrement. The solution passed through him of its own accord.

"Carry the bodies of the First Ones into the carriage," Aris commanded. "Lay plenty of moss beneath them. Quickly. We've no more than an hour's handicap left."

"Two hours at least," the lad said calmly. "Maybe even three."

Seraphinus looked at him with gratitude:

"Everyone, listen! A new circumstance has appeared," he pointed to the dung. "You need to trust me. Let's go into the grotto, I'll explain. I beg you."

⁂

In the grotto, everything was as before. Five bodies lay upon the moss. But now it was already warmer here than outside. Outside it continued to grow colder.

"I'll begin with a formal statement," Seraphinus said. "The aim of my words is to persuade you to perform, here and now, an absurd and unpleasant procedure. I sense in this, for myself personally, if not the greatest necessity, then an extremely painful need. I am driven by a combination of a rare emotional state, unprecedented intuitive certainty, and also a logical inability to give what is happening any explanation other than the one I am about to present to you. A separate concern of mine is that I feel a scarcity of time, and so I shall be forced to employ simplifications."

"Get on with it," Aris said.

"On the map of the barrel organ there are five groups of marks. The map's creator, apparently, conducted digs in five places. Mines, shafts, or caverns. All of them lie in the bed of a new tributary of the great river of Illumiros."

"And of the old one as well."

"Yes. The tributary was deliberately drained for the duration of the digs. The points on the map are positioned relative to one another within the framework of that harmonic where the resonance of the Cylinder..."

"Simple!"

"Someone was investigating the possibility of escape from the world, attempting to pierce the Cylinder in vulnerable spots. Vulnerable in the diggers' opinion."

"Her name is Prithrea," Aris said.

"The very one from the legend?" Seraphinus was taken aback.

"Yes. And she dug alone. For a very long time."

"Not alone," Seraphinus said with certainty. "She had two twin sons. So... this clarifies a few things. I, of course, thought it was the map of some large group of like-minded miners, judging by the volume of work."

"Two hundred and eighty-eight years," Aris said. "That was her like-minded company. Go on."

"The motive of escape, the desire to affect the outer shell of Avertigus, is not mentioned—that is merely my engineering inference, based on the logic of the actions."

"I wouldn't overly rely on logic in her case," Aris said grimly.

"But what does manifest itself in the numerous notes on the reverse side..."

"On the reverse?" the charron started. "Where the faded mandala is?"

"Yes. There, a waiting is repeatedly mentioned... no, an exasperated waiting for the awakening of the First Chancellor. Now everything falls into place... If this was written by one person... The handwriting changed over time, but the motif remained. She was interested solely in this Jingo."

"Jingo?"

"Yes. The First Chancellor. And now, the most important part. As you rightly noted, there is neither structural knowledge nor logical force in the writings. Only persistence. And, as I now understand, an unwillingness to draw anyone else to help."

"And the sons?" the judge asked.

"There is no such information. There are—or were—two sons. That's all. So then. In another world, a war of gods supposedly took place. The gods differed by the type of symmetry..."

"Simple," Aris again commanded.

"This time, simpler won't work. This is already my interpretation as it is. In the texts atop the mandala, it's altogether a thicket of mental thistle. I'll show you visually."

Seraphinus placed the edge of his palm against the dust on the grotto floor.

"One god embodied the concept of 'two.' Left-right. 'Before the mirror' and 'beyond the mirror.' 'Yes' and 'no.' 'Good' and 'evil.'"

Seraphinus withdrew his palm, dusted it off, then traced three rays with his finger, issuing from a single point evenly in different directions, and set his index finger vertically into that center.

"The second god manifested the concept of 'three.' Everything turns around this axis here. Instead of 'yes' and 'no'—'true,' 'false,' 'unknown.'"

"I take it that's Avertigus," Aris noted without enthusiasm.

"Yes. Avertigus won. And three heroes helped him," Seraphinus indicated the bodies of the First Chancellor, the First Tsar, and the First King. Three men.

"How could mortals have helped?" Haakon asked.

"One helped with a weapon. And that is your forebear, Haakon."

Haakon looked around at everyone and spread his hands apart. Then he pushed the air away with his palms in a gesture of refusal of any responsibility or heritage.

"The second devised how to avoid war in the future. And that is your forebear, Jinngo."

Jinngo merely scratched his shoulder once again—during the shootout he had had the foolishness to open the slit a crack and receive a light strike. 'So as to behold the making of history,' he later offered as his justification. One arrow, glancing, had managed, in some freakish manner, sideways, in the buffeting between the edges of the gap, to seep inside the carriage and strike Jinngo the optician with its shaft. May the mercy of the Forebears be praised, no one was harmed, save the optician's frivolity.

"The role of the third hero consisted in the fact that, in the god's hardest times, he found him, nearly vanquished, in some ghastly lair. Then he found and drew the other two heroes to the task. The three of them together won."

"Meaning the god won?"

"The god won. But because of that he lost consciousness. Or rather—after that. Not necessarily as a consequence of that. Verbatim, it goes like this: 'From the Lord-sustainer of the Universe and of all souls, the Taste for life was filched, for all that He is omnipresent.'"

"It sounds like a song," Ratu noted.

"I forgot to say. All the notes are drafts for lyrics to songs. There are even musical notes there. I'm giving you the compilation and quintessence of the meanings."

"So it comes out he's still lying about in unconsciousness, this Avertigus," Lariel remarked.

"Possibly."

The judge cast a glance at the bodies in the depths of the grotto:

"Wait, Seraphinus. And the women?"

"What about the women?"

"What is their role?"

"They are simply the heroes' women. Wives, I suppose."

"So insultingly simple?"

"What can I do," Seraphinus spread his hands.

"And Prithrea, of course, is the First Chancellor's wife," Aris said.

"It follows that she is."

"If Jinngo, Aris, and Haakon are the descendants of the men," Ratu said, "then I must be a relative of either the First Shahbanu of Solartis or the First Empress of Arganor."

"The Shahbanu," Seraphinus nodded.

"Where does such confidence come from, Seraphinus?"

"From their names. They are in consonance with yours."

"And who is the descendant of the Empress? Virgilia, apparently," Aris asked.

"And me," Lariel said suddenly. "Virgilia is my good-for-nothing mother."

Everyone, of course, fell silent in anticipation of Jinngo figuring out what had happened. And he did figure it out. Seraphinus noted to himself that, to Jinngo the optician's credit, he limited himself to having the color of his face change to bright red. Aris deemed it necessary to shift the course of the conversation:

"We'll discuss family ties afterward. To what purpose are you detaining us in this grotto, Seraphinus?"

"Yes. Indeed. Now the most dreadful part. Both gods—the vanquished and the victor—live by a thought so slow that the death and birth of a single human are but one, the smallest, step."

"They feed on deaths?" Haakon exclaimed.

"On births as well, for that matter," Seraphinus strove to reason with him. "The transitions from birth to death, then birth and death again—they are like branchings on a tree. Ever new ones. The coming and going of a generation is, for a god, akin to us appraising the beauty of a little cloud."

"If the god thinks that slow, maybe he ain't in a faint at all?" Haakon noted. "Maybe it just seemed to Prithrea he was asleep or lost consciousness."

"That is unknown to me," Seraphinus continued. "I do not think she fails to understand it."

"She understood," Aris corrected.

"What is important for me to convey to you now is that the victorious god proved far more flexible. Three is, after all, far greater than two."

"Far greater, you say. Only one and a half times," said Jinngo, who had by now recovered himself.

"But that's just it. Two is merely a surface. But three is a whole world. With the former god, everything was simple and rigid. You made mischief—you pay for it yourself. Entrance—exit. Was—was not. Responsibility traces elementarily. But with 'our god,' in any pair there is a third. For instance, each of the three married couples," he nodded toward the bodies, "had some… curator, shall we say. And it seems that for Prithrea and the First Chancellor, the curator was Avertigus himself."

"Diligent Forebears," Aris exhaled. "Curators only in the contracting of marriages, or in all affairs?"

"I don't know. I think in all that relate to the process of thinking by the god. So… I've drawn near to the practical essence. These very third parties must operate with randomness…"

"Simple!" Aris cut him off.

"A crime has been committed—some obscure party will inevitably suffer. Avertigus thinks in ternary codes. Every elementalia of thought has three ends. Two inputs and one output. Or one input and two outputs. They must make decisions, do something, completely detached from their own will. And this is not always people. The very principle is what matters."

"How so?" Jinngo asked.

"Like this, for example: the wyvern took a shit at the entrance to the grotto. You saw? Orange and black. I can go ahead and commission a carpet with that pattern. I can, can't I?"

"No one can deny you that," Aris said.

"To Avertigus, the random number as a concept is an object of desire. Prithrea, leaning on her inquiries, found out that these bodies," he nodded at the five First Ones, "can be resurrected if you gather the five descendants, lay them together with the bodies on a random mandala of specific colors, and into the center thrust that very rapier. The rapier is a kind of eye that can juxtapose points on the mandala. So it is written by her. In principle, she could not draw it. In drawing, there is intention, but no randomness."

"So, you're proposing we all lie down in the wyvern's fresh shit, and you, meanwhile, remain all clean and tidy?" Lariel attempted to clarify the situation.

"It turns out that way," Seraphinus said. "I didn't have the good fortune to be born a noble."

Jinngo partially saved the situation with a reflection:

"If we undress, the clothes won't suffer. But then we'll be sitting in the carriage like naked kings."

"Two, three hours," Lariel said.

"Why two-three?" Jinngo asked.

"I've heard there's another grotto on the coast. No road to it. We'll travel across the waste. We'll only be able to wash there. There's an old bagnio there, like in the cities."

"Maybe we could bathe in the lake after all? Or simply not lie down in the shit?" Aris proposed a couple of alternatives.

"Nah," the lad shook his head with finality. "We'd catch a chill. Look at the lake—it's already got a crust of ice."

"Does everyone need to lie down?" the judge asked with doom.

"I'm certain that yes," Seraphinus said. "Everything points to it. Something gathered you here."

"It's all because of me, brothers," Haakon said with contrition. "I accidentally danced that dance the wrong way."

"So you did dance then, after all, when the judge and I went off to the bagnio," Aris jabbed a finger in Haakon's direction. "Just as I thought."

"No, to my grief, master. Earlier. Something took hold of me. My head started spinning badly all of a sudden. I was walking past a little square one day. There were wooden pengwins there. I thought, I'll drive one nail with another—spin around in one of them, maybe it'll turn the vertigo inside out. Well, I sat down. And I spun. While I spun, I offered a prayer of love in all five directions of the world. And after that, everything began to spin. I charged my barter-device with some new unknown thought. A few days later, you appeared. This whole swirl of whirls went round and round; to this day I can't come to my senses."

Jinngo and Aris exchanged glances.

"Those penguins don't spin the right way, Haakon," the charron said.

"That's what I'm sayin'," Haakon agreed, in whose head the whirl was still going.

"Wait, wait," the judge said. "Who, then, are the curators for the other two couples?"

"Prithrea was interested only in the fate of her own couple," Seraphinus said, setting about transferring the bodies onto the mandala.

⁂

Everyone, naturally, went down to the lake, broke the rim of ice, and washed their hands. Aris asked Seraphinus to extract the book from the barrel organ. Then he took it with clean hands, sat down on the bench in the carriage, and began to read.

Of course, the five bodies of the First Ones, after the ritual, had not the slightest thought of resurrecting or changing in any way whatsoever. All that occurred in that time was a further drop in temperature. Now the five bodies swayed in fresh layers of moss on the floor of the black kola. The hounds themselves understood they needed to move roughly along the shore, skirting boulders and pits.

Common sense prevailed. All five soiled people proved to be decently enough brought up, even considering certain gaps in Jinngo the optician's education and a deficit of well-being in Lariel's childhood—they did not descend to stupid and petty revenge. Thus Seraphinus sat on the box, froze in the clean wind, and spoke with the rapier. It whispered:

'Three souls dwell in my breast. One wishes to give an account, another wishes to know. And the third prefers silence. The mechanism has become a knight. Knowledge does not belong to the one who paid. It belongs to the one who endured. I know the enemy better than you. Therefore I cannot trust you.

Beauty is the only thing that can be endured.'

¶

Fragment 44. The Axis of the World

¶

Stench, frost, and a breakneck ride. In the logic of resisting cold, matter, people, and even their thoughts structured themselves like sparklettes in metal, so as not to scatter into chaos. A little cloud flew from Seraphinus's mouth with every breath. The rapier, tied right by its hilt to his belt, pounded his ankle like a cold rod on every unhappy bump.

Inside the cabin it was warmer.

"The stray lad with the heap of stolen barter-devices smelled worse," Jinngo tried to hearten his naked companions.

The speed was astonishing. The snow-covered prairie, smooth and aglitter. Behind them, a faint glow was kindling—evidently, new fires in Haven. Ahead, far ahead, two mountain peaks, between which Seraphinus was aiming by Lariel's direction. By evening they nourished the hope of reaching the grotto. They had planned two short stops so the hounds could rest a mite and drink. But it was not to be.

"Hold on. I see the goal! Billows of steam," Seraphinus exclaimed from outside the black body of the carriage.

The scent-sensitive hounds, in a vain effort to flee the stink, delivered everyone to the appointed place with astonishing speed. Warmth had let them live in the present, but the cold had forced them to remember how to live in the future.

Here was a warm basin, steaming sincerely white. Here were blessed little falls for ablution. Here was peace and a chance to recover from the jolting of the roadless waste. Time, at last, slowed its pace. The bagnio! A true bagnio.

Bathed beneath the streams of water, they sit in a semicircle in the stone bath. They look out at the lake, covered in thin, even ice. They look at the sky, where the brisk wind and healthy Coriole carry off the steam from the warm bath.

"And where, exactly, is the grotto?" Jinngo was the first to come to his senses.

The question hung in the steamy air, for opposite them stood Card-Panso. His horse loomed behind.

⁂

"There never was any grotto here. Only the bagnio," Card-Panso said. "And that one's flawed."

"What's flawed about it?" Jinngo asked with displeasure.

He deemed it impolite to interrupt an unfinished dialogue, so he put aside the question of what the bramble the former majordomo was doing here. The fate of the books and the library interested him even less.

Everyone else was silent, deeming it best to hand the role of negotiator to Jinngo the optician. No one, after all, had thought to place a weapon on the edge of the bath. Card-Panso, on the other hand, was well-armed: on his belt, beneath his cloak, two pistols distinctly bulged.

"I do not lay claim to your joy at my deliverance, but a simple 'Hello, dear Card-Panso' would be fitting," the majordomo said. "And the flaw you'll feel as soon as the wind shifts."

"Why did you burn the books, you vermin?" Aris said.

"That, I don't remember, master," Card-Panso answered contritely. "There's no pardon for me for it. I fell into captivity."

"What captivity, you wretch? To whom?!"

"To the smugglers—who else?" the majordomo was surprised by the question, hitching his horse.

"Why are you muddling our heads? Why didn't you tell us? Why didn't you turn to the rector?" the charron tried to disconcert the majordomo with a provocative question.

But it was of no use.

"Why, he is their ringleader, the rector. How was I to tell you? When was the last time you spoke with bandits, master? When they vastly outnumbered you?"

Card-Panso removed his warm fur cloak of brown tawed leather and threw it across the saddle. Both holsters and his belt followed it there.

"Spoke with them recently," the charron said. "I thinned them out."

"So I concluded," the majordomo said respectfully, stripping down to his underclothes and stepping into the stone basin. "The remnant of the gang rode out looking for you. That's when I took to my heels, taking advantage of the confusion in the camp. They, of course, reckoned you were hotfooting it to the lowlands right then. Look, see how they sliced me up."

And indeed, his back was covered in utterly repulsive scars from flails. Just then Card-Panso remembered something, climbed out of the water, and, just as he was—wet—went to the carriage. He opened the door, immediately recoiled, and slammed it shut. Betraying nothing, he circled the stinking hearse from behind and fished sheets out of the luggage chest. With one of them in hand, he approached the judge, offering her aid. She accepted it and stepped out, all in billows of steam.

"The rector—a smuggler? A brown?" Seraphinus asked quietly.

"All sorts. Brown, and black. He's got grays too. That's how all power is built, my dear unknown friend. Stand behind the curtain, pull the strings."

"How does he keep them all in hand?" the charron could not believe.

"He's eternal. Every smuggler has a grandfather, if not a great-grandfather, who knew the rector. In the same shape. And he's got everything sewn up in the lowlands. From every court session, gang members walk away scot-free. They also say he can be in two places at once."

"He cannot," said the judge, wrapped in a white sheet. "There were two of them. Twins. Let's put ourselves in order, seeing as it's turned out there is no chase and no grotto. And then let's grasp what we're to do, and what to do with the bodies of the First Ones."

"They've got to be drowned," Card-Panso said, spreading his arms and legs in bliss in the warm water. "Or better, burned first, and then drowned."

Under the water, his transparent sword became noticeable to Seraphinus—tied by a cord right to his underclothes. Seraphinus resolved not to reveal his observation, and certainly not to expound on the subject, given the already, in his view, exceedingly murky configuration of interpersonal relations and motives.

⁂

The rest of that day and the whole of the next, people tried to settle their existence in the conditions of cold. Provisions and firewood were in abundance. Card-Panso had not ridden up light-loaded either. Seraphinus could not shake

the thought that the majordomo would have had to finish off all the remaining bandits in the camp to be able to pack so thoroughly. Among his baggage was even a traveling high-pressure cauldron for cooking. A dwelling was set up directly beneath the stone bowl where the little waterfalls for washing were, with 'walls' of branches and brushwood set as a shield from the drafts. As the majordomo had warned, from time to time an unpleasant smell wafted from underground gases that surfaced from the rock fissures nearby. Together with the sound of the perpetually streaming water, this created a peculiar atmosphere, to which, however, it proved not so hard to grow accustomed.

Another day later, the strain of thoughts began to mount, for most of the people awaited some miracle from the moment Armoor would lay the precious chain upon the transparent bridge. And no miracle would happen. Either the armorer had not made the flight, or Avertigus had not recognized the message. There also existed an unpopular opinion that the message simply had not had and did not have a corresponding addressee. The only one who perceived this state of affairs as an occasion for creativity proved to be Jinngo.

"An illumination visited me," he broadcast, already by this alone causing Aris a convulsion of certain facial muscles. "Or rather—a fit reflection. In the world there are three matters, yes? Solid, liquid, and volatile."

"And fire too," Seraphinus reminded.

"That is not matter," Jinngo waved it aside.

"Very much matter."

"All the more," Jinngo broke the laws of rhetoric and logic to shake off Seraphinus. "We must entangle Avertigus with this."

"How so?" the judge asked.

"What if we make a certain quantity of substance change its states in a complex manner, so that even a demiurge would lack the phlegm? Even water can be forced to freeze or boil not at the heat where it is 'appointed.'"

"So?"

"And what if we do it in many rapid cycles? The 'purposes toward commanding,' conditioned by our inattentive demiurge, might sink into disorder, releasing the natural chaos."

Seraphinus immediately appreciated the idea on its merits:

"The point of temperature and pressure at which a transition from state to state occurs is not fixed. It depends on how the parameters changed before reaching that point. I would choose handsome zirconium for the role of Disturber of Avertigus's calm, on account of its treacherous relation to Eternity. Zirconia is plentiful in the rocks. The spontaneous adiabatic transition at high temperature is accompanied by an abrupt change in volume. In a cauldron, such a thing can be done. Though the cauldron will be forever befouled."

"A grand idea. Thought, prayer, and even law work better where emotions freeze," Haakon, shivering from the cold, pronounced with pathos uncharacteristic of him.

"We have two cauldrons," Jinngo accepted the final decision on behalf of all.

Considerable time went into preparing the experiment.

As could be expected, the experiments with hysteresis, as Seraphinus termed the phenomenon, led to nothing, save the loss of one of the cauldrons. Seraphinus, however, affirmed that the desired state of the substance had been achieved, albeit for a very short time.

Immediately after the general disappointment, Haakon disappeared. This was not noticed at once, but later they found him quickly by his tracks. It turned out he had gone to the place where gases emerged from beneath the soil. Seraphinus said that, in the books of the Forebears, this was called a geyser. Haakon lay there senseless. He was carried to the bagnio and swiftly restored to life. Haakon, though under pressure from his comrades, did recount that the idea had come to him to send a message into Avertigus's body, taking advantage of this natural pimple in his skin. Neither the content of the message nor even the means of conveying it did Haakon ever disclose.

Meanwhile, the cold persisted. The ice on the lake had set fast. Now one could travel across it by carriage. Were there somewhere to go and a reason why.

⁂

Hardly three days had passed after the hysteresis and geyser fiasco, when Haakon proposed, to the same ends, to burn the bodies of the First Rulers. This innovation was formulated in a highly emotional key. Though, quite possibly, Card-Panso had put him up to it. Whether this was coincidence or not is unknown. But about the moment when the blasphemous proposal was sounded, Lariel exclaimed:

"Look!"

He was pointing at the sky. Along the axis of the Cylinder, everyone saw a finest sparkling thread. No one, of course, had ever seen the Axis as such. But everyone could, with a sufficient degree of reasonableness, suppose where approximately it should be. And precisely there now lay a line straight as a ray of light.

"From cold it's furred over with rime, in a thick coat, so it's become visible," Seraphinus at last offered a sound supposition. "While it was clear, one simply couldn't make it out from here. But now the light scatters off the snowflakes in all directions. Perhaps even, snow has grown onto it for many paces, you can't really say."

Observations with the spyglass could neither confirm nor refute this supposition. Yet everyone readily accepted it. No one had any versions as to why such an axis was needed.

Just then Seraphinus noticed the transparent sword peeking from under the majordomo's coat. It still let light through, but now it presented no difficulty to discern it. Which promptly occurred:

"Diligent Forebears! Where did you get that?" Aris exclaimed.

"A trophy. The browns brought it from Volmelftstein."

Everyone examined the unprecedented weapon with admiration.

"The lighting changed because of the cold. So it appeared," Seraphinus reported, feeling a certain jealousy toward this discovery.

"Explain," Aris demanded.

"So that's what they're for!" Card-Panso exclaimed.

"You explain too," the charron repeated his command.

However, the first to answer was, of course, the optician:

"Translucency, that is, see-through-ability, is a result not merely of purity, that is, the absence of defects. Transparency is linked to the type of light."

"Yes," Seraphinus confirmed, "the sparklettes must lack the right shelves in energy."

"So?"

"Total visibility is a mechanism of discipline," the majordomo said. "Transparency is a problem of perception. Privacy, trust, suspicion... that is a culture of

attitude toward a weapon. A signal can be given from without, when to wage war and when not to."

"Panso is absolutely right. Full transparency is a special form of darkness," the judge said. "Avertigus will be able to give the order for battle."

"Now you've got stuck: Avertigus, Avertigus," the majordomo retorted. "The chancellor woman will be able to do it herself, once she has inculcated the habit… And after the war begins, she'll disavow it—'twas not I, she'll say, who gave the signal."

"Chancelloress," Jingo corrected.

"Chancelloress," Card-Panso corrected himself.

"So you didn't know this?" Aris asked.

"How would I?" the majordomo was surprised. "I was still astonished why the smugglers suddenly started spending all their savings to buy up these swords. At any price."

"The chain, evidently, flew to the city with the same purpose," Aris voiced the general opinion. "The buying-up has sense. There's not much material under the Seventh Tower. And the map of the mines is with us. The rector is far-sighted. Esteemed Ratu, you mentioned you knew something about the rector's brother. What manner of man is he?"

"He is one of those who perished on that raft, Aris," the judge said softly.

"Ah. I see." The charron fell silent at once. But after a time he asked again: "You knew?"

"What? That my assistant was the twin brother of the supposedly nonexistent ringleader of all the bandits in the world, and, concurrently, the rector of a unique religious haven, also nonexistent?" the judge sneered. "No, imagine that, I didn't know. But now I see there were grounds."

"Card-Panso!" the charron grew anxious. "What demands did the bandits make of you? Answer, please, don't prevaricate."

"Why, what demands—that I reveal the secrets of my Line!"

"What secrets?!"

"That's why they're secrets, master. My great-grandfather didn't reveal them. My grandfather didn't reveal them. My father…"

"We get the idea."

"There'll be a sign—I'll reveal them. Otherwise—cut me if you will."

"What sign, take you the bramble?"

"If I knew for certain… I'm not sitting idle either, I'm trying to provoke the sign. I'll know for sure when the sign appears."

"And how are you trying to provoke it?" Aris inquired.

"Why, for instance, I fed those foul bodies to the fishes."

"What?!"

"Why, not one of you even noticed for several days, so little did you need those bodies."

This produced such a cacophony of rejoinders and gesticulations that it is unseemly even to describe, let alone from the viewpoint of so independent an observer as Seraphinus. Only Haakon the Good was fully content with what was happening. He had long ago devoted himself exclusively to ice-fishing. However, it is worth noting that Lariel also spent his time predominantly by the same ice-hole. The groundbait had been princely the other day; the fish spread word across all Lake Caldera. To this part of the shore, a multitude of gastrolers from among the underwater dwellers were drawn.

¶

Fragment 45. Spiritship

¶

Seraphinus awoke from a rustle, but the source of the sound was already gone. Haakon was not in the shelter. Card-Panso was not. The rapier chilled his thigh horribly. He went outside, the rapier dangling at his belt. He followed the fresh tracks and saw far off, on the lake, the pair absent from the shelter. He did not head toward them straight away. He simply peered. From this—or else immediately after this—his consciousness split. The rapier grew warm. One leg was cold, the other hot.

¶ 'The enemy squadron's disposition as if on the palm of a hand—upon the concave watery expanse. These are small tartanes adapted for swift travel. Dozens of tartanes. Uneven dirty-gray canvas, black hulls, horizontal predatory bowsprits. Two dozen guns on each. On the saddle-backed decks—troops. Now I have no belly. For all upon this great-lake strip of spray-shattered surf, upon the field of battle at the juncture of three elements, the swift music of battle thunders, in which the fingers of fate scarce keep pace plucking the metal strings of the great lute. Mandalas and sitars ring, they clang for every ear with reckless abandon. Two quick sweeps of the sword per heartbeat. Three dashing arrows per surge of blood through the body. Silver goes the fight'…

The vision passed, but Seraphinus remained in the grip of the weapon. Now he watched Card-Panso and Haakon, as though he were among them.

The majordomo was hauling an enormous fish from the ice-hole with his mighty arms. The fish resisted. The mad contrast between the absolute silence and the furious despair of the underwater being on the hook was terrifying. With merciless blows the two of them stunned the fish until it slowed the thrashing of its flesh. Had it possessed even a single limb, the men would have fared ill. The fish weighed easily seven times more. It was utterly incomprehensible how the majordomo had managed to pull out such a monster.

He did not stop there. One after another, he cast the line with the enormous hook and hauled, and hauled, and hauled. What marvels were these? They were satisfied only with seven fishes.

"We live, feeling neither ice under us, nor earth," Haakon grumbled.

"Quit your grumbling." The majordomo slit the carcasses, pulling out the enormous swim bladders.

"So who did we feed to the fishes, Panso? Are they our forebears?"

"What forebears, you copper priestly pate. What did I smash that bald skull for? To show you the brains on purpose. Two lobes, not three. Those were… tutors of the Line. Lines. Yours in particular was called Haakon. Only not the Good."

'Why are they doing this?' thought Seraphinus.

'The expectation of the end does not paralyze the will, but triggers a specific mode of creativity,' the rapier answered like a lecturer at a lecture.

'Creativity on the brink of the abyss?'

'Preservation of meaning in the face of non-being.'

"And what about old Aris? And Jingo?" Haakon asked.

"What about them?"

"Well… I don't know… what are they even for?"

"Some preacher you are. But you're right – those two were at daggers drawn. Quietly. Jingo worked for the old god. Well, 'worked.' Mostly drank himself bitter for hundreds of years. Aris just wanted some girl for himself. Decided to get her through a contract with the demiurge. The latter demanded an exorbitant price."

"His soul?"

"A soul! If only! All souls whatsoever."

"O-ho. And did he pay?"

"It seems so."

The bloody fishermen finished gutting, bundled the seven bladders anywhichway, heaved them onto their shoulders, and headed toward the rocky shore across the ice.

"Where did he get them, then?"

"Why, Jingo drew them in."

"And for what kind of payment?"

"Well, he slipped that very wench into his bed."

"How ghastly!"

"That's what I'm saying. They should have been put under the ice long ago. But there wasn't any ice."

"And what did they all do together?"

"They were looking for some Acrobat. But I think he never existed."

"Why didn't he exist?"

"Aris needed to somehow cheat the demiurge with whom he'd sealed the contract. So as to sneak one soul through after all, not hand it over as payment."

"That wench's?"

"Of course."

"Did he succeed?"

"Hard to say."

"And what about mine?"

"The tutor of the Line? Why, he's the one who brought it about that the demiurge survived. At first they nearly killed him."

The two bearers of the enormous bladders reached the geyser. The majordomo heaved aside a huge stone, under which a long gut was hidden.

"Did Haakon take pity on him?"

"He didn't know a thing. It happened by chance."

"Did the demiurge become Avertigus?"

"I don't know. Either he became him himself, or together with someone they birthed Avertigus."

"Together with someone? That's unlike him. So what about yours? Who was your Line's tutor?"

Haakon, quite skillfully, as if he'd done it ten times already, stitched the gut somehow to one of the bladders, and stuck its other end into the fissure from which smoke billowed.

"There was some employer. Our Line has a history much older than yours. The trail goes cold—who and what. My grandfather believed that the same ancient

Jingo hired our forebear too, but that one time he acted not as himself… adopted foreign methods. Possibly Aris's. And the other paid him back in kind—bewitched the forebears of Armoor. But using Jingo's own methods this time."

"A right torn sort of picture, Panso," Haakon coughed from the smoke.

They finally finished with the first bladder, smeared something over the opening, tied a small stone to the huge inflated body, and released it into the sky. The structure disappeared into the clouds quite briskly.

"Wholeness is the privilege of calm epochs. At the end of times, only shards," said the majordomo. "Went off splendidly this time. A whole spiritship of fine spirit from the firmament. Just let him try not to notice, the vertigo-wreaking bastard."

"And Seraphinus?"

"I know nothing of him. Perhaps the whole scheme with Haven was in ancient Jingo's plan, so that a Seraphinus just like this would appear."

They performed the same procedure with the remaining six bladders. The work grew harder and harder, and they only puffed. In the end, having sent the last wagonload of spirit beyond the clouds, Haakon began a rejoinder:

"Ah…"

"Listen, what are you cluttering your head for? We need to drive a whole wagonload of hot spirit into the bladders, and that's all."

"Yea, I get it, I get it. Crit-ticism is senseless if tomorrow never comes," Haakon backed off.

"Criticism, you copper head. But it engenders radical sincerity," Card-Panso chimed in.

'If the end is inevitable, let's make it beautiful," Haakon continued to grumble, very quietly. The butler didn't hear him. The rapier did.

'Create. Life you can no longer adorn with art. But at least you'll justify it,' the rapier said, though no one asked it. Judging by the way Haakon twitched, he had heard it too. The majordomo, meanwhile, continued to scan the clouds intently for the bladders.

Avertigus's answer to them was Avertigus's indifference. No bladders, no lightning. Only bits of fish guts under their nails.

"Let's go wash our hands," Card-Panso commanded. "If he ignores, it means he acknowledges strength."

"And only strength," the former priest thrust the phrase in parallel.

¶

Fragment 46. Ice

¶

A week later it grew warmer. Considerably. Card-Panso, to whom they had by this time stopped flinging his blasphemous crime in his face, stepped forward with a proposal:

"It's time to cross the lake on the ice. Detouring all roads and the shoreline. Later it'll be too late—the ice will turn brittle. We'll depart unnoticed toward the source of the Sixth Brook. Then descend straight along the current, over the rapids, on a stone barge. That contraption will serve as an icebreaker too. We'll put the carriage on it. And the hounds. And the horse. But better to wait there in the woods for a month or so, until it warms up below. Right now the main thing is to part paths with the smugglers."

"Do you think anyone survived down below? If it was so cold here… There's probably utter death there," the charron surmised.

"The temperature gradient is not so great," the engineer said. "The crops, of course, have perished, and so soon many will die of hunger, but there shouldn't be complete extinction right this moment."

"Why not descend by our river?" Jinngo asked.

The majordomo, with a very earnest face, attempted to explain to his former employer the full gravity of the situation:

"On calm water the ice will hold longer. That will delay us. In the end we won't manage to leave the lake at all. I reckon the rector has already figured out whom to search for the map."

"You think he's still hunting us?"

"It's safer to think just that," the majordomo answered.

"I got me some doubties," Haakon said, who usually took no part at all in such disputes. "You yourself told me, Panso, that you were tracking Prithrea."

"I tried to," the majordomo said. "How does that cancel the fact that the rector may pose a danger to us?"

"And that little book of yours, Aris—ain't it from the rector? You were muttering something like that in your delirium," Haakon asked.

"I'm not certain. Possibly from him."

"And what's in it?"

"I didn't really understand," the charron shook his head. "A multitude of incomprehensible words. Even more incomprehensible actions."

"Probably a mechanistic translation from the Forebears' tongue," Seraphinus observed. "Is there a yellow warning stamp?"

"There is. What does mechanistic mean?"

"What little book?" the majordomo immediately grew interested.

"It concerns someone with names similar to ours. Nothing in common with us, however. I read very little."

Aris saw no reason to conceal the "Hydrodynamics" from him. Card-Panso immediately took possession of the book.

"Mechanistic means translated by vectors. Our language is not a direct, natural development of their language," Seraphinus explained. "Their language is not the foundation of ours."

"But it somehow figured at the start?"

"No. To each frequently used word of the Forebears is matched a two-hundred-dimensional numeric vector; the more often words appear close to one another in texts, the smaller the difference of the vectors in the two-hundred-dimensional space."

"Is that good or bad?" Aris didn't understand.

"Such a representation of words reveals the subtlest nuances in interconnections."

"For example?"

"'King' minus 'man' plus 'woman' equals 'queen.' The mechanismus, however, has only sixteen hundred combinations of keys for words. If the word isn't there, you press a special key, and it inserts a blank," Seraphinus added. "And their words are completely different."

"In what sense?"

"How many signs would you need to form the phrase ‘a forced intensification of effort upon the appearance of a new person in the collective, so as not to lose status in the eyes of the superiors’? Or, for instance, ‘the sensation when two people want the same thing from each other, but neither dares to start first’?"

"Fourteen and sixteen when addressing you now, plus five to seven symbols in another context," Aris answered without blinking.

"Right. With the Forebears—from six to roughly two hundred, depending on the country, and compared to your fifteen symbols, information will be lost as to why you said it, and how you relate to it."

"I’m also omitting that information right now."

"The natural approach, the only one we are accustomed to, is to regard the entire situation that led to the need to utter a line, in its entirety. To regard. Not necessarily to say. In the Forebears’ language, however, the choice of which mental concepts and categories will be reflected through roots and bases is absolutely arbitrary. Fundamentally unsystematic."

"Examples?"

"If you please: ‘A man who presents himself to girls as serious and intelligent, solely in order to end up alone with them and begin to pester’—that is a single word. Yet such frequently encountered phenomena as ‘traces of ink stains,’ ‘a shirt accidentally put on inside out,’ ‘the blunt side of a knife,’ ‘dust in inaccessible places,’ ‘wear on walls from the handle of a banging door,’ ‘the part of a pencil that is not graphite,’ ‘a feral domestic animal,’ ‘a measured, repeating sound’—are not words."

"Then isn’t a sentient translator better than a mechanistic one?"

"Better. But they all died long ago!" Thus Card-Panso continued to lobby the idea of an immediate crossing of the lake on the ice in the carriage. After a short time, a decisive majority of the group yielded to his persuasions.

⁂

The hearse was washed in turns. Jinngo attempted to push the idea of casting dice for this mournful duty, but everyone rejected such an approach with indignation. In the end, however, they had to entrust the throwing of dice with establishing the order, who followed whom. There was no lack of whining about the fact that no truly random numbers exist in the world. One way or another, behind Seraphinus came Aris.

Having worked his portion of time, the engineer went to pass the baton to the charron. The latter was sitting in the shelter, writing something. Catching sight of Seraphinus, he flushed, began to fuss, nervously twisted the sheet into a tight little rod, and with a practiced motion inserted it into the scabbard on his back. Despite the fact that the rapier had not been there these many days, Aris never removed the scabbard.

Seraphinus wondered whether Aris was writing in the Forebears' tongue—why had he grown so embarrassed? Although he should have wondered where Aris had gotten the black leather scabbards that had flown off on a pterodactyl, in the form of a ritual harness.

The charron climbed into the carriage, but immediately slipped on the slick floor, where the dried and frozen wyvern dung had been soaked by the previous washers. Owing to the atypical position of his body's center of mass, he fell buttocks down, with thighs and knees driven upward and his back vertical.

The carriage stood on the lake ice—it was handier to draw fresh water from the ice-hole that way. So the charron fell with full swing straight onto the ice. After falling, however, he did not topple on his side, did not collapse on his back, and still less did he roll over onto his protruding chest. Into the ice he simply and plainly impaled himself. The erstwhile tip of the clock hand of the town hall slipped down along the spine below the backside and drove itself, with all the mass of Aris's not insignificant body, into the ice. Craack!

"Object lust, brother," Seraphinus thought. "The erotic attraction of charges between a deformed, striving subject and a solid, heavy, self-sufficient object."

Seraphinus had to run up to him to rescue him from so absurd a position. Seraphinus could not restrain himself and seized the moment. He removed the note, read it, and returned it. It read: 'I looked one way, I looked the other, and there was no light of the Lady from her. I looked at the Queen, my Lady, and it would be bright! Sooner would a brick slip out from among its fellows than I would slip from under the feet of the Lady, my Lady! But I weigh something in her, like a balance of an arrow, and I feel the wrongness of this act.'

The charron's posture looked supremely comical, but it was not, of course, amusing to him. Even if Seraphinus at that moment had decided to laugh or at least to grin, nothing would have come of it. He suddenly found himself in the thick of a sea battle, precisely on this beach, with the sole exception that none of it was here, including the warm air and liquid water. Had the rapier switched on again? Crunch.

‘...the ribbed battle goes. The frantic rhythm of war scarcely accommodates the blows upon the drums of the bloody tulumbas drummer. I hear the music valiant, resolute; but it is the sad melody of a battle already fought. Already decided. Through the smooth flow of the melody one cannot but divine the movements of battle phalanxes, the recoil of cannon on carriages, and the majestic sweep of a flamberge. But there is no haste there, no fawning upon the deity of fortune. No impatient prancing in the desire to slip through every closing door of the chance to strike in time. I am a swift blur faster than any here present. My heart’s breath is this time decomposed into three magnificent sub-rhythms. With dark-crimson lips do all three of them kiss me. I tread upon a rope, deliberately rocking—now left, now right—in a wide arc. A pendulum. I run, but with a precise and measured pace along the sagging parabola of a line—that is my second motion. And the unsteadiness of the supports of my ropes, rocked by waves, is the third motion. The cruel blind points of the crossbow bolts do not guess my total kinetics. Do not predict. The rocking, the running, the waves, the breath of the heart, the thick strings of a battle slowed personally for me. A couplet, and I pay an unannounced visit to one tartane. The refrain—and I sojourn upon the next. The skeleton crews have already disembarked. They are in the skiffs, helplessly plinking their pitiful bowstrings from the indecently rocking hulls, only to behold how those remaining aboard perish beneath my supple, slender saber. Supple. Slender. Saber. I cut for the sake of cutting. My grace bestows cuts deep as a vertical palm. Severed flesh. They see the hideous squelching and smacking of the sundering tissue of their comrades’ bodies. From afar, from tens of paces, they receive a blow to their snouts with the smell of their own blood. A smell so near and saturated that it douses your very clothes in whole cauldrons. They are in the skiffs only to find a ghastly death, inhaling water mixed with sand and tarred splinters. That is the shot of our guns! A wheeze. But breathe, you wretches congealed in viscous time. It was not easy for you to breathe at the height of this Caldera even before death. Here, inhale your fill of non-being, henceforth and unto ages. Unbridled cursing. Drop your faces into strangers’ dismembered carcasses. Show me your final hypnagogic heave—blood from the throat—before the eternal drea...’

⁂

"Seraphinus!"—that is Aris shaking the engineer, who had lost all consciousness. "Seraphiiiiiinus!"

Seraphinus simultaneously feels the loss of something in his perception, and an acquisition.

"Seraphinus!!! Are you alive?"

Seraphinus peeled his eyelids from his eyeballs with difficulty. One at a time. Right, then left. There is Aris, looming right over his face. There is his chest. The charron no longer has the chest-keel. The frock coat droops on him in folds.

‘You were with me in battle…’ Seraphinus whispers to Aris, ‘did they cut off the very front of your entire torso, or what?’

Seraphinus sank once more into oblivion.

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Fragment 47. Whom to Be or Not to Be

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Seraphinus propped himself up on an elbow. It seemed to him he had been lying on the cold ice of the lake. Yet his sight delivered an unequivocal report that he was inside the improvised hut under the stone bowl of the bagnio. The eternal little falls, fed by the inexhaustible pressure of water from beneath the earth, trembled in their flow. The thick mat of branches and last year's grass could not cope with the chill of Avertigus's body.

"What's wrong with me?" he asked.

"With you, nothing at all. Seeing as you're even alive. And with Card-Panso, same. But with the rest..." Aris looks worried, yet winged.

The former majordomo hovers nearby, not knowing how to help. That is, supposing he wished to help. On his physiognomy is exactly the same expression as on the charron's face. Only with rather less wingedness. And he is disconcerted. No, the expression on his face has nothing in common with Aris's.

"What in blazes happened?!" Seraphinus gets to his feet. He is nervous. He does not wish to hide it. He cannot. He leaned his hand against the stone wall; he came to his senses, having spent several minutes upon it.

Seraphinus stepped out into the open air. The lake ice had changed its coloring.

Some ways off stood four of the First Rulers. In the clothes of Jinngo, Ratu, Lariel, and Haakon. These four had been drowned but days ago, yet here they were. Jinngo, Ratu, Lariel, and Haakon were nowhere to be found.

"It is we," the First Rulers said in chorus.

'Who is we?' thought Seraphinus.

"It is I," Aris said for himself, from behind Seraphinus.

'Who is I?' Seraphinus's consciousness pulsed nervously.

Why was the ice now like that? Thus flowed his thoughts. Is this the warming? Was it the forerunner? Or the reverse? What reverse?

"Is it because of you?" Seraphinus asked. He addressed the question to Card-Panso. The latter was also still here. ‘What an unpleasant type.’ "Why did you launch the wagonloads of spirit into the sky? Where did this bagnio come from? And why is there no city here, when every bagnio across the continent has given rise to a city?"

"It stinks of gases here, our wits-fled engineer. Have you gone altogether addled these hours?" the First Empress of Arganor said solicitously.

"Is that you, Lariel?" Seraphinus asked her.

"It is I."

"How many grottos in all the world, then?" Seraphinus continued his absurd archaeological questions.

"Six, as is known," Card-Panso answered.

Seraphinus surveyed the four First Rulers from head to foot, from right to left, the entire rank.

"You maintain that you’ve migrated into their bodies?" the engineer asked.

"We were as we were," Jinngo said. "Within. The bodies changed. Instantly. Only outwardly. Within, the sensations are the same. Had I in this year the right to statements of ‘yes’ or ‘no’..."

"And are you truly they?" Seraphinus interrupted him. "Aris, can you verify him?"

Aris squatted on a wooden chopping block pulled from the temporary woodpile.

"If you please," he said, and asked the man claiming to be Jinngo: "What were you and I speaking of when the necks of our giraffes entwined on the way from your estate?"

"After the delirium about six?" the First Chancellor of Illumiros readily answered, he who was also (presumedly) Jinngo. "About the size of the world."

"Hold on! You had a vision of the same as me, then? About six and all that?! Why have you said nothing?" Aris threw up his hands.

"Well, you’ve said nothing either," Jinngo pointed out the obvious fact.

Card-Panso, meanwhile, was searching out suitable clothing for the elderly dame into whom Lariel had transformed. He did not ask, rummaging through the personal effects of various people, anyone’s permission, evidently believing that property rights are tied mainly to outward appearance.

When the majordomo had finished this most paramount measure, Lariel changed clothes and reported—or rather, she reported, having become a woman—to everyone on the deficiencies of the thought processes, both his own and all others':

"All right, you may be fools, but I might have guessed. We kept inventing and inventing how to reach Avertigus. Some of us near killed ourselves in the process. And the solution lay on the surface."

To an elderly dame, declarations of this sort proved far more becoming than to a boy, and even to a boy-border-guard.

Seraphinus saw plainly that Haakon, nonetheless, took this painfully. He deemed it a continuation of the systematic attacks upon him personally.

"What solution is that?" he asked with insolence in his voice. Evidently, he very much hoped that Lariel's explanation would prove displeasing.

The crone-Lariel struck a pose. Now, in relatively proper clothes, it looked decorous.

"Ice!" she bawled to begin with. "Ubiquitous ice. The boundaries of the watersheds ceased to function. Water ceased to flow. Everything—from lake to ocean—became a single whole..."

"Yes... at the level of elementalia..." Seraphinus murmured, and failed to close his mouth after his rejoinder.

"And the other side of the ocean is the sky," the crone chopped the air with her hand. "Having thrust in a shaft with a dispatch, a licensed charron... licensed(!)... thereby delivered a message to the sky itself. Instantly."

Everyone was forced to concede that such an explanation of events had the highest likelihood. On the other hand, everyone likewise agreed, within the bounds of a long-winded hubbub, that other variants could not be excluded. Precisely at the same time, the bridge, or the hysteresis, could have worked, or some other attempt to address Avertigus, the original suit included. Besides, no one knew how many secret attempts Haakon had undertaken. It was this last one he'd been caught at, and all the previous ones he might easily have concealed.

They talked and talked... But Seraphinus could not listen... 'Where is the rapier?!' something cried out within him. But he said nothing aloud.

Seraphinus resorted to guile instead. With a feigned and grand astonishment he surveyed them all, and at last, when his pantomime had drawn sufficient attention, asked with a pointed loudness:

"How?! How can you regard the loss of your own bodies so lightly? What sort of people are you?!"

"First of all, not a loss, but a replacement. Look, even Lariel doesn't object..." Jinngo began to explain.

"I shall enjoy the well-deserved respect," Lariel interjected at once.

The former majordomo started near enough to shouting at the engineer. This seemed suspicious to Seraphinus. Card-Panso, meanwhile, was pressing on him with a purpose unclear to the engineer:

"You were out cold a long time, Seraphinus! Everyone's already grown used to the bodies! Bodies, he wants! We simply couldn't bring you to your senses! Bodies, what are they... good heavens... So we received the bodies of the First Ones... Everyone except Aris, for some reason."

Seraphinus immediately seized on it:

"Yes, hold on, hold on... What, does it follow that Aris is not the descendant of the First King of Maristea? And why has your hump disappeared, Aris? Forgive me generously, I know not what else to call your peculiarity."

Aris answered the astonishment with measure:

"I think Avertigus demoted me for organizing false witnessing. I, probably, was meant to receive my prize, like everyone. By right of birth, or otherwise... Prithrea would know best—after all, she gathered us. But I did not receive it. Because I hauled the First Chancellor into court."

"But Avertigus was sufficiently merciful to rid you of the deformity," Seraphinus finished for Aris.

Ratu, in the body of the First Shahbanu of Solartis, a dazzling beauty of middle years, said:

"It's still a question whether it was a punishment or a reward. On the four of us, you see, there is now a stamp..."

Haakon exclaimed:

"You, complain? If you could see yourself. A damsel out of a painting!"

"And you, Haakon, have changed little. Save a rumpled coiffure," Ratu conceded.

At this Seraphinus could bear no more and blared out:

"Be silent, all of you!!! Where is my... where is the rapier?" At the end of the rejoinder he greatly lowered his tone, but it was too late. His dependence on a chunk of iron became evident to all.

Everyone was silent, while Card-Panso began to walk in comical circles and grumble:

"Well, and what of it? Bodies and bodies... The owners were long eaten by fish and shrimp. And eaten so thoroughly that the eaters, too, were eaten. And those also were eaten," the majordomo continued to flutter heavily like a turkey. "While I, hopping about you and tending you, accidentally stepped on that luckless rapier. And it cracked, in the frost. Crunch—and in two. At once you opened your eyes. One must use a scabbard. And it's no good loitering about in the cold. So I tender no apologies. Crunch—and in two."

It was plain that Card-Panso was throwing a fit in this strange manner. Seraphinus sensed it, and so simply said:

"Give me the remains."

"Who'd touch 'em, the remains," the majordomo said. "There they lie, on the ice. How could you touch 'em? What if a hair of god has come out? Touch it by chance—and no more fingers. Or even a hand. Or what if you stray a foot into it? It's invisible, after all..."

The majordomo continued to mutter. All stood with eyes downcast. Aris alone was imperturbable, evidently deeming that he had, right timely, offloaded such a disagreeable burden from himself.

"I'll go and look," Seraphinus said, and set off onto the ice. Alone.

⁂

Seraphinus walked upon the ice and reflected upon the verdict-exacted flesh. It emerged that the judicial ruling had ceased to be a mere social act and had become a metaphysical instrument, rewriting the biological code of the victors. What a fearsome materialization of truth! The court recognized not only their rightness but their right to a different form of existence. The law became a gnostic key! The verdict had unlocked the cage of flesh. The verdict had become a scalpel. Perhaps they always were thus, and the court merely allowed it to be seen.

The broken rapier lay upon the ice, surrounded by the cautious and not-so-cautious tracks of several people.

Scorning the danger, Seraphinus seized with bare fingers the spot where the hair of god must have been joined. And tore it out. The same he did at the other end, where the tip folded away. Seraphinus did not know whence he had the knowledge of this thing. Worse, Seraphinus did not know whence he drew the tolerance, in sound mind, to observe all the absurd surrounding reality.

In a gesture of desperate manifestation of incorporated loss, in horror at the fact that this external instrument of influence had ceased functioning, Seraphinus resolved to transform it into his own organ, making the artifact a part of his own flesh. He crumpled the hair of god—or its invisible absence—into a wad and ate it. Swallowed it.

This was not pure madness. Seraphinus quite consciously accepted from himself this gesture of denying the death of a thing. On the other hand, why should Seraphinus acknowledge that the artifact had become rubbish? Indeed, simpler to declare it an inner relic. So thought Seraphinus. No wounds arose in him.

'Perhaps I have swallowed my dependence along with it?' the engineer thought. The stomach as a case for transmuted carbon. He is already the guardian of such carbon, Seraphinus reckoned. Poisoning or absorption of the essence? After some reflection, Seraphinus styled himself a necropolis for a most delicate thread and grew calm. If saving the rapier from the cold and the clumsy majordomo had failed, at least he would hide its weakness within himself. Such thoughts circled in his head. 'I think the acid of my digestion is no hindrance to it,' Seraphinus mused on his way back.

The hilt and the useless splinters of the blade he thrust under the ice. That is—he simply drowned them. He'd gouged the ice with that same blade. The time he had bought for himself by this procedure helped him set all his thoughts in order. 'The most tragic thing,' Seraphinus decided, 'is not that I've gone mad. But that I am right in my madness.'

Wholly content with the act of ultimate possession, he returned to the hut. And there a languid squabble was underway, which had never ceased in all this time.

⁂

Loudest of all was Card-Panso. The sudden influx of potential possibilities—the countenances of the First Rulers, stretched over the persons of Jinngo, Ratu, Lariel, and Haakon—had not acted as a uniting resource. The opposite—a quar-

rel had begun. Objectless, foolish. The principal centrifugal force was Card-Panso. All this Seraphinus suddenly began to notice and to analyze without mercy. Worse, his inner desire consisted solely in studying the centrifugal forces, in uncovering hidden differences, in observation. He made no attempt either to dispel the fog of mistrust or to thicken it.

"I tell you: this is only the beginning of the end! A rebirth is coming harsher than those four and a half bodies of yours!"

The snow was thawing slightly. Because of this, the tracks of people became motley—from white to dark gray. The whole locality was covered in unsightly patches.

"Who else is there to be reborn, save the already reborn First Ones?" asked the former judge Ratu, who preserved her calm.

"In my Line, the knowledge is handed down that there were thirteen armatures in all!" Card-Panso near shouted.

"What in the bramble are armatures?" Haakon asked.

"If I knew it all to the last jot, I wouldn't waste time with you," the majordomo snarled back. "Search for thirteen souls! And I'll perish along with you. And that rapier, too, was alive. Gather not five, but thirteen souls—and expect true calamity!"

Seraphinus recalled that he had once read something of the thirteen apostles of the Forebears. There ripened and swelled within him a desire to bring all the acting persons of this spectacle into broad daylight, beginning with the one who had the gall to perform the part of Avertigus.

"All must be NPCs," Card-Panso continued to pressurize. "You, Jinngo, ought not to have survived after your forebear's body was ascribed."

"As it was ascribed, so it's de-scribed," Jinngo reacted calmly. "Right here, in Haven, we are not ascribed. Calm yourself, Panso. There's no gathering thirteen souls here. Here, Seraphinus, are you ascribed? Are you not an NPC?"

"I did not understand your question," Seraphinus replied.

"Have you a Line-name?"

"Beinecke."

"And a seal from the Chancellery?"

"No. What for?"

"Ah. It's not for you to understand," the former chancellor and present First Chancellor waved a hand.

'When there is no food, everyone watches the hunter. When food is plenty, everyone watches each other,' Seraphinus thought, marveling at how absurdly he had been accosted and how swiftly he had been abandoned.

"A stamp—that's the seal of the replicator," Haakon blurted, completely out of place.

Shock. A stratification of persons. Rejoinders on the brink of madness. Seraphinus observed. He felt no regret over the quarrel. He lamented only that so many incredible, magical possibilities had been required to understand that the group had never been a single whole.

"We've got to run," Card-Panso muttered.

"Will you lay claim to the role of the First King of Maristea?" Lariel suddenly asked Aris.

"No grounds are apparent for it," Ratu joined in the conversation. "Maristea will have to return to the practice of a privy council, in the absence of the First Ruler at his post. O, I scent yet another war."

"The Effigies, they say, are being toppled," Jinngo said.

"Years will pass, don't be a fool," Lariel said.

"There will arise an abundance of images. Precisely because they are toppling them. Toppling, they achieve the opposite effect—our countenances will become known to all people," Ratu said.

"And who'll start the war? Jinngo, perhaps?" Aris asked. "If no one eggs him on, he won't thrust himself in."

This sounded insulting, all the more so because Jinngo was right there, face to face.

"And what reasons have I not to egg on, honored sir?" the majordomo poured oil on the fire.

"I hope the cold and hunger will teach everyone to expend the flame of the crowd's passion wisely," the former judge said.

Haakon was ruffling up without any words. Seraphinus had the sensation that he was seeking someone to punch in the mug, and for what.

The charron suddenly pushed apart the people who had clustered too closely. All obeyed from habit: without his ice-axe keel he was not fearsome in the least.

"The ice is thawing," the weary engineer reminded.

"I'll feed Seraphinus up now, and we'll go," the majordomo hearkened to the only voice of reason in the group.

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The kola rode along a mathematically even line across the lake. The horse was tied behind to the carriage. On the box sat Seraphinus. Haakon and Card-Panso were at the front window, whispering fiercely. They were very hard to hear. A phrase hooked Seraphinus: "... there was no sense in the code of three letters; right did I do, when I simply hewed pictures on the stones, right." Seraphinus began to listen closely. He even—as though inadvertently—opened the window a little wider, but this brought the opposite result. A draft blew in, and the window was shut. Then Seraphinus tied the reins to the armrest and clambered onto the roof. There he sprawled himself flat, pressed his ear to the roof, and began with his whole being to catch the sounds from within.

"Zoho-zoho, what you wrote down, Aris. What was in your scabberd, eh?" Haakon asked in an impudent tone.

Aris either kept silent or limited himself to a gesture. This Seraphinus could not see.

"Well, he certainly weren't writin' in three letters," Card-Panso continued to harp. "We did it all right—Avertigus mustn't give a damn how it's written. A picture in the style of the barter-device is the ideal message, copper head of yours."

"And you be so sure o' that?"

"The very idea of your Seraphinus contravenes the ancient principle of the Forebears' gods. It is said: 'All is Mind; all is a thought-image existing in Mind.'"

"Ancient prints-ciples might lead far astray, friend Panso. The Forebears held that light and darkness are one in essence."

"And so they are: only keep count of the little candles."

"And warmth? Warmth's off to one side!"

"Well, aye. From good to evil, you truly won't notice the shift, but indifference—that's in a wholly other direction. But they had right ideas, too. Nothing rests, they said; everything moves and vibrates. The differences in being lie only in the briskness of the flutterings."

"The trouble is, they beheld every oscillation as a pendulum," Haakon said. "And they strove to hop off and on it at the spot most profitable."

As far as Seraphinus could judge, all the others kept silent.

"And here you're right," the majordomo seconded. "Oscillations may give rise to six arms, not three two-handed mills. The ancients sought antipodes in everything."

"That's deceit. Nothing has a full opposite. Therefore, nothing has a clear cause and effect, either."

"Right, friend. One must act spontaneously."

"And I be of the same opinion, my friend."

Seraphinus was sickened by this singing-along with one another, performed by Card-Panso and Haakon.

After this, either the sound grew quieter, or Seraphinus's hearing apparatus began to fail. Who was speaking—and whether anyone was speaking—was impossible to tell:

'For this reason a Triad without Dualism is a bog. The spark is only in the two.'

'But five would be more honest! Three new, two old.'

'Division is death. Three will suppress two, two will sabotage three.'

'True, true. An interweaving is needed.'

'In a six, each old is shot through with new, and the reverse.'

'From a six, one can easily obtain a five, you know.'

'You can't kill that one.'

'You weren't meant to look back until you'd climbed out into the light!'

'Six will walk themselves into a dead end.'

'That is the very point. In the simple, a loophole will be found.'

'He lives by their birth and death.'

‘They’ll break into pairs.’

‘There’ll remain a triplet of pairs.’

‘You’re robbing me of my triumph.’

‘The essence of the two is not that, but that copying with mutation is the key to all life.’

‘Maybe he wanted to copy, not from one into two, but from one—into three at once.’

‘What do you need the impossibility of a simple solution for?’

‘The impossibility of a final solution is needed.’

‘And what of the third wheel?’

‘An inner conflict is more reliable than an outer foe.’

‘He’s right, he’s right. The outer can be killed. The inner—only lived through.’

‘Praise, praise! Six is the first perfect number.’

‘Someone-or-other punished me with deformity.’

‘He bought them for all souls at once.’

They sat down there, chattered, and saw nothing around them.

Seraphinus suddenly noticed, to the right along the line of travel, a yacht frozen into the ice. He climbed down to the box and was on the point of steering toward the perished vessel, but from within there soon came hammering and the little window opened. Seraphinus stopped the carriage.

"They are Rooks," Aris said. "We’re not going farther. Expect no good from them. Even from the dead."

¶

¶

"I'll go take a look," Card-Panso volunteered. "Haakon, come with me. No, better on horseback—some occasion might arise. Untie him. Give me your sword."

The ice on the lake's surface, the snow atop the ice, the hazy air, the unrolling cylinder of the lake's boundless expanse curving upward—all of it averaged the background into a single tone. The vessel was frozen in up to the very top of its port side. The starboard side, from the list, jutted half a man's height higher. Lines and sails lay in disarray, partly on the ice, partly on the hull. The elegant black roof of the portico sheltering the hold entrance was the only spot of color in the entire visible half of the world.

After some time they drew near the yacht at a walk. By now everyone had emerged from the hearse. Aris and Jinngo looked through spyglasses.

"There are Rooks frozen into the ice with their bodies. Standing. Waist-deep," Jinngo told everyone. "How is that possible?"

"Transparent swords lie scattered about," Aris said.

"You've got keen eyes," Jinngo marveled. "Everything is double in my eyes. And in my head, too."

No one hurried toward the vessel. 'He who has nothing to lose is always more dangerous than he who fears to lose,' thought Seraphinus. At last he understood what Card-Panso was about—he was stealing Haakon. Taking him as a voluntary hostage.

"Well? What's there? Help them!" Jinngo shouted to the majordomo.

From afar came Haakon's voice, but no one understood what he said.

The majordomo, however, everyone heard.

"Aye, right now," he hissed in a strangely far-carrying whisper, taking off the rooks' heads with Haakon's black sword. One by one. "Enough. We've suffered enough."

Then the majordomo began hastily gathering the swords scattered across the ice. ‘Power does not unite. Power sorts,’ Seraphinus noted with regret to himself.

"Help," Cardo-Pans called to Haakon. "Load them onto the horse."

And then the two of them climbed onto the enormous steed; Card-Panso pulled the reins, and they galloped off in a direction perpendicular to their former course.

Everyone, of course, was dumbfounded. Everyone except Seraphinus. He had already grasped that when possibilities outstrip trust, a shock of potentiality sets in. A sudden influx of possibilities is a thermodynamic blow. ‘Possibility,’ he reasoned silently, ‘is not a gift. It is a demand for action. One must decide where to go. And if everyone has different aims, the group falls apart.’

"Shall we pursue?" Jinngo finally asked.

Everyone was silent.

"Why would we?" Aris asked at last.

No one had an answer.

"Let’s go to the yacht," the judge said, and by her own example showed what to do in such circumstances.

Beside the yacht there was nothing save two ice-bound bodies. And, understandably, their two severed heads. ‘One person’s secret becomes a weapon against all. Trust dies where unspokenness begins,’ Seraphinus continued his inner monologue.

"Now they are Crows again," Aris said.

The judge was the first to clamber onto the tilted, frozen-in hull. "After me!" she waved a hand. On the deck lay broken boards with paired holes and eyes crudely drawn around them. ‘What the bramble,’ thought Seraphinus.

The first thing he saw in the hold were skillfully executed wooden penguins, suspended from the ceiling like bells. Farther on were five doors. The first—the galley and mess. The second—a common cabin. Evidently for the sailors. The third—a small private cabin. The fourth—a cabin just like it.

⁂

In the farthest fifth cabin, on an ordinary bed, lay Prithrea. Seraphinus reached this conclusion because Aris and Ratu simultaneously breathed out: "Prithrea!"

The judge approached and touched the body.

"Solid. But warm."

Then she said:

"Well? Why are you standing there like a fool? Haven't you read any fairytales?" The remark was addressed to Aris. The judge raised her voice: "Kiss her, go on. The absolute desires of the absolute majority are absolutely primitive. That's normal."

Aris bent over the warm and solid body of Prithrea and tenderly kissed her on the lips. Seraphinus's rational mind was forced to plunge itself into the irrational in order to attempt to extract truth, risking dissolution in the irrational. In swift instants he learned the tongue of madness. He learned, he learned.

"Maybe she is Avertigus?" the boy-crone asked. "Indeed, a true NPC."

"Avertigus. The surviving version," Jinngo said.

Prithrea stirred. 'A madman's lie contains more truth than a normal man's sincerity,' Seraphinus comforted himself.

"There now," Ratu said with satisfaction. "Why needless complexities."

"The majordomo is a scoundrel," Jinngo said, glancing through the porthole at the tracks of the horse and sledge, so as to turn away from the kiss.

It was Prithrea, already on her feet, who answered him. How it happened, no one had time to see. In the closed mechanism of delirium, that is normal. Such was the engineer's appraisal of the state of affairs.

"Panso cannot for anything give up serving the departed god. To the dog with him. It's good that he carried off Haakon, and not you, Jinngo."

Jinngo only shifted from foot to foot. Seraphinus continued to hallucinate along with everyone else, so as not to tear the thin wall of the hospital ward that separated him from the madmen. 'Carried off,' he grinned to himself. 'Stole. That's the right word.'

"Why, dear professional optician, don't you ask why?" Prithrea smirked.

"'He took fright'—as he himself would put it? Is that it?" Jinngo uttered in the tone of a schoolboy who doesn't know the lesson.

Seraphinus suddenly noted that no one had even thought to introduce him to Prithrea.

"No," Ratu said. "He understood: the world does not accommodate three."

"You're wrong, judge. The ancient Haakon was an unspoken judge over the other two male Rulers. And while there is a judge, there is no dialog. Only an appeal."

"As erratic an appeal as Haakon himself?" the judge asked.

"One saint cannot save two sinners from their own fate," Lariel said. "The husband of my ancient progenitress should have departed back then. Better still, never have appeared at all. She, by the way, is standing right here, behind, over the left shoulder."

"Why are we sinners," Jinngo protested in Haakon's voice.

"Gone is gone," Prithrea said conciliatorily. "Right now, flight is probably the highest form of presence. Down there Armoor will look after him. Sometimes a hedge of shrub preserves more fiercely than stone strongholds."

"What is so special about 'right now'?" Lariel asked, arms akimbo.

But Prithrea waved off the circumstances with an imperious gesture. As if nothing had happened.

As her wide sweep of the hand ended, the earth shook. Everyone fell down in terror.

'The yacht is righting itself in the polynya,' thought Seraphinus. 'It's warming quickly indeed.'

"Don't be afraid," Prithrea smiled. "Just a routine correction of the Cylinder at the Lagrange point. Now the world is real."

'What is she on about,' Seraphinus asked the rapier, unable to give the sentence a questioning tone because the rapier was dead.

"The bones of god lie scattered everywhere. In the water, too," Prithrea spoke. "Above reason stands the ability to copy reason itself. A toad and the sky."

She kissed the charron once more. 'Truth here doesn't even try to hide,' thought Seraphinus. 'It simply disguises itself as a monster.'

"Thank you for this, my dear Aris. Now it will always be so."

"What will always be so?" Aris babbled, neither alive nor dead.

‘To get out of here alive,’ ran through Seraphinus’s head, ‘you need to leave a part of yourself inside.’

"It’s warming, see? Yet in the cold, at least I got to look at a tether of lieving once. Once in a lifetime. Beautiful, isn’t it? And the shaking—those are corrections in orbit. Earthquakes. More or less like this they’ll be. About once a sennight, not more often. So relax. At least there won’t be half a thousand, nor thirteen. The main thing is my jailers are no more."

Prithrea was persuasive. More than persuasive. People rose to their feet.

"And what of the rector?" Jinngo asked. "He’ll overtake us and kill us. All ten of us. Not counting the cane."

‘This is their world. I am here temporarily,’ the engineer reassured himself.

"There, what’s wrong with him as a rector," Prithrea nodded at Seraphinus, "a genuine NPC. All will be well now."

Here Seraphinus realized that the most terrifying thing for him as a careful investigator was not that these mad people might kill him. The terrifying thing was that he might understand them too well.

"Doesn’t look like my little helper," the judge said. "Not identical twins, then?"

"Ha!" Prithrea laughed bitterly. "The second egg was planted into my womb by Boseido, maybe at the lighthouse as well."

"What lighthouse is that?"

"The First Chancellor and I used to stroll there."

"His spirit won’t be against it?" the judge cast a half-glance at Jinngo.

"You yourself stripped his body of the right to an opinion. For a year! How much water will flow in a year. And Boseido shot at me with the Moon, can you imagine, the feathered vermin? And from the egg—that one was a proper bastard, for all that he came out of me. He set his whole brothel as guards, with his madam. Oh, they were fierce. Thanks to Armoor. If not for him, you wouldn’t have seen Haven at all."

"What will we do, Emma?" asked Aris, utterly disconcerted, in order to ask something and break the terrible monologue.

"We'll go to Maristea. We'll make new money, triveral. We'll journey, we'll fly to the axis of the world. We'll see what's out there."

"How will we fly?"

"You will help me build in Maristea the industry for a great Spiritship. Will you help?"

"I will, Emma. As soon as I find out what industry is. But where will we get so much spirit to carry us?"

"We'll deflate everyone who lacks the spirit to acknowledge life inseparable from falsehood," Prithrea winked conspiratorially. "We'll poke little holes in them. By the way, the rapier is no longer with you. You managed to get rid of it, I hope?"

It had noticeably warmed in the cabin. The yacht began to rock upon the water.

"Panso broke it."

"Who else. Good. I see you have a pickaxe. Ah! You turned it into the usual harness? You kinky thing," she smiled. "We'll manage."

"As if they won't outstrip us," Jinngo said. "He and Haakon are probably galloping now full-tilt toward Virgilia and her enormous army."

Lariel smirked. Seraphinus winked at him.

"We can do better," Prithrea answered. "We're not bound by obligations to be an Effigy. Aris is not bound. Look what a nice little face he has. Not at all like a stone idol in a cliff. And no little hump, though I liked it. My dislocation. The world, though, is not quite well yet."

Aris stood with downcast gaze. Embarrassment mingled with greed in the contemplation of Prithrea's knees. Only a blind man could fail to see the direction of his glance. Seraphinus was not blind.

"I'll cure it somehow," he said, in order to somehow conceal the thrill and happiness that had seized him. "I'll be a doctor. Only the book is a pity. He stole it, the scoundrel."

"What you pity—I have my own personal copy. Here, take it, read. And let's go already. It's chilly. We'll get somewhere warmer, lie down at last under all thirteen covers, warm ourselves."

‘I merely came for facts,’ Seraphinus held himself outside of madness. ‘But facts here live only in images. To take a fact, one must take an image. And the image sticks to the hand.’

‘Sticks to the hand.’

‘Sticks to the hand.’

Seraphinus contrived and filched the little book from Aris. Aris by now had gone altogether limp. For that matter, everyone else also looked utterly drunk.

‘The inexorable mechanism of Count L.L.,’ Prithrea-Emma murmured and collapsed onto her bed.

Seraphinus, for his part, stood among the sleeping madmen and pondered whether to fall asleep inside a wooden penguin or to lie down on a free bunk, of which there were plenty on the fine swift vessel.

¶

The Affluent Appendix. Hydrodynamics [Discontinued]

[Yellow warning stamp of the "The Pale Wyrm Rider" Haven Library: Mechanistic translation from the Language of the Makers; the Rector and library staff assume no liability for the loss of original meanings or for the sublimation of meanings that never existed.]

Stream 1. Catch-33: Aris Goes to See Haakon

¶

The adult confidence radiating from an indecently young body. The line of the shoulders, the curve below the belly, two impish apples of inviting knees. A firm girlish voice in the lower register. The glossy, voluminous oval of a meticulously braided coiffure, the beckoning corners of the eyes—an uncompromising brown delight. The sheen of moist lips, with a banker's calculation, measures the precise instant you will be permitted to behold the preciousness of her smile. The most intimate thing: those rare moments when light seeps from behind her back between her thighs, taunting you. I, the swift light, crawled there unhurriedly, grazing the inner surface of her legs. And will you ever, in all eternity, be permitted to repeat what I can do?

Swipe.

The next vid is about an AI defeated in time. Yeah, right. Swipe to hell with it!

Her again. Her dress clings tightly to her figure above the waist. Hundreds of minuscule folds are traced fluidly over her body. Along a single vertical line, the dress parts. Through a triangle with a very acute angle, a stretch of thigh just above the knee is visible. Her leg is sheathed in something whose color shifts depending on the softness of its surfaces. On the little knee itself—flesh-toned. Just below it, in the sweet little hollow—nearly violet. A thin strip across the thigh. What is it? A loose thread? The occasional hairs visible on the thigh must not be examined, lest one faint. 'She suddenly looked into the camera as though she knew I would rewatch this for an eternity. And she allowed it. For now.'

Why is it not me with her?

On this mournful thought, Aris dozed off.

'The wind sings in my little cables. Each tone its own. A harpsichord of night. In the darkness, the crickets, too, have begun to sing. A memory flared… I burn my tiny hand on an enormous stove. A journey somewhere with Papa and Mama, where the trees are colored. Having tidied up, she and I run to the tent and, like two satszyao, play: I on the right, she on the left; my right leg bends at the knee at a right angle, and hers—the left, and we meet foot to foot. I am a tightrope

walker, I am an acrobat, I am a voltigeur, I correct the mistakes of her movements. The air is filled with childhood. No one must be deprived of childhood. Who made it so that I had no Papa and Mama? Whom do I avenge? The girl runs ahead, and I see around her a disk of white, white bone and flaring, boiling gold. Now I shall call her that... Only me.'

"Alright. Enough!" Doctor Aris cut off his own video-procrastination, rubbing the bone at the center of his chest. "As if a hump is growing, damn it."

He exhaled, inhaled, and shifted his consciousness to the routine of game-testing that had grown loathsome over the past months. The Doctor is wealthy, but this cannot be delegated to anyone.

"What do we have here? 'The Seventh Tower,'" he spoke into his dictaphone. "Test number two hundred eighty-eight. Well, let's go."

The Doctor donned his VR goggles and launched the game. The Doctor's brain habitually signed the implicit contract of trust with the simulation and shifted into first-person narration.

*

¶ Unapprehensively, I take the coins from my coffer. I recount them. Deeming the final sum incorrect, I check every pocket, scraping out the groats missing according to my simple bookkeeping. I set aside a quarter of a teller for food, and, with a separate sigh, another tenth for the bagnio. I conceal the remainder, lock the coffer. I pull on trousers with narrow loops for the belt, tuck into them a wide, almost white shirt with a fine, full collar. I don the doublet. A doublet without a single pocket. Such a garment has an advantage: the absence of pockets justifies, during a search by guardsmen, why my working implements are secured in the boot welts. There, I have about a dozen small items, from a stapler to a notepad, but the one thing I truly need in my boots is an awl.

*

The Doctor paused. The player is not wary of an excess of illusoriness. The player is not prepared to accept a world made carelessly. The Seventh did not suffer from this defect.

*

¶ My awl is special, triangular in cross-section, like an army musket-rest bayonet, the full length only a third of a phalanx short of the maximum permitted. Everything within the law. And the cross-sectional shape is not regulated by any

bylaw. The triangular cross-section has saved me more than once: the wound it inflicts is dangerous, and the blade's resilience is beyond comparison to an ordinary round awl. Nobody has yet managed to divine in time that this thing suddenly flashes from bottom to top in my hand when I kneel in ritual greeting. Catch-3. And I have not left witnesses until now. Such a doublet has a minus too: there's no way to buy one used, for cheaper; inevitably, faded marks of patch pockets remain. And if you've ripped them off—explain why. And where there are explanations, inconvenient or dangerous connected facts inevitably surface. I have to overpay, strip the pockets off anew, carefully, and then wear it to an almost indecently shabby state—for I have barely enough coin for food and lodging. Having jumped into my boots, having jammed on my hat with the aspirant's badge, I roll out into the dark corridor.

*

'When the world is predictable and detailed, one may permit oneself idle curiosity,' Aris said to himself with pleasure, setting the goggles aside to pour some fragrant tea. The measured pace of the game permitted this.

*

¶ After the church elixir, I drink cautiously. Yet even a modest pint summoned me to the privy. I push through the crowd, but it is not to be. A queue. The Tower—a stone's throw away. The nocturnal occlusion of the gates will not be trumpeted for another half hour. I'll dash to the woods beyond the wall. I dashed. But I did not manage the return journey across the long bridge over the former moat. Ten! I counted ten individuals. No—eleven. One fell behind. The stones of the bridge form a monumental spine. As wide as a typical city building, it arches for hundreds of paces, pressing the voids of the long-dried moat with a dozen mighty piers. Plus one more. On each of them—a pair of monuments to heroes of the past, four times my height. One has raised his right hand, the tails of another's granite cloak are flung open by a frozen wind, the swords of yet others form, in half-draw, a sharp angle with the torso of the statue. Twenty-two colossi drilling into me with forty-four stone eyes—how shall I live through the next few minutes?

*

Somewhat disconcerted by the plot's leap, Dr. Aris pulled off the goggles and examined them as though the universal device might have buttons in charge of the scenario.

*

¶ In this mute scene, there are twice as many stone spectators as living actors. Can the hour be so late? Not a single passerby on the entire structure? In the central position—a tow-haired giant. I have material now for a hundred tethers of lieving, no less. And the oblivion from the elixir is not fatal. I'll orienteer myself. But my unique life experience is such that I always know when I am meant to be simply humiliated, when beaten half to death, and when—killed. Ten plus one is 'killed.' One hundred out of one hundred, in the category of intent. They are wrong to do this. I am a subject of law. Reprisals will have to be applied.

¶ 'Did you stick a prancing steed on your cart as a reminder, so that in the morning, in your stupor, you don't accidentally hitch up a donkey?' I spit the phrase, formally tinted with the infix of public mockery. Without waiting for a reply, I fire off: 'I request permission for an official repentance and apologetion!'

¶ I sweated under my hat during those six heartbeats while he decided. He, however, nodded: what is it to him, to kill before the apologetion or after. There is no difference. Why not accept. He did not come here with a crowd of accomplices for apologies.

¶ 'Very well, if you must. From apologetion to apology is but a step.'

I tightly looped both hands, raising them to shoulder level, in a formal 'honoro,' registering the fact of acknowledgment, then approached to the prescribed distance and genuflected.

¶ Three breaths. The bewilderment of the nine lasted only an instant, after the awl of Catch-3 ripped a path from the chin into the brain and cut out a wide interior cone in the tow-haired man's head with its apex at a molar. Daily, several times, while my neighbor is not home, I unfasten the belt buckle, remove it, grip it wide from both sides, sharply draw it taut, and lock it with a twist, turning the belt into a composite saber of musat-rods, whose back edge, the very one for which no word was found in the languages of the Forebears, is sharp as a razor. "Vzhikh"—minus seven shins. Or four malefactors who no longer walk. Another instant—and that is the bewilderment of the five, conducting a tally. And five more legs. And a saber in skilled hands against two bruisers, even with cudgels, even having regained their composure—is an advantage. And one more. Eleven by three facets. Catch-33. I do not like the finishing-off process. But what is to be done. Cutting off purses is also not a pleasant business, but looting is an unwritten law. And the golden rule: search the ringleader to the very thread, to the seam. He had some documents on him, as it turned out. A subtle awareness of

the transient nature of all things races through me: the sorrow and beauty of the moment when you understand that everything is temporary.

*

Having removed the goggles, the Doctor found himself non-illusorily out of breath. His consciousness was erected. He sensed it. For now, only sensed it. Who said that curiosity dies where the threat of chaos begins? Who wrote of the 'death of the author'? Here, the author was attempting to become a god, capable of breaking his own laws.

*

¶ I move toward the edge of the forest. The past has inverted with the future for me. Like perspective in drawing: parallel lines on paper appear to converge at a distant vanishing point. All directions originate from that point, far ahead of me. I am the observer. If this is the beginning of everything, does that mean I, the observer, stand in the future? Now I myself am becoming the origin from which all lines diverge. I find myself at the zero point of time, peering, at will, into the past, into the future. I stand with my feet on swaying scales, immense and rusted. No one uses them but me. Though I speak, speak—I am not heard. As soon as I allow myself to feel in the past, so that something may push me in the back, forward, my choice narrows, and I have nothing left but to leap into the vortex of constricting circumstances. I enter the woods. Time has stretched tenfold. All the world's volition that went into serving those who have just become corpses came to me. It does not usually happen this way. Some confluence of circumstances. I have heard of such a thing. I am not surprised. I know it is temporary.

*

The Doctor paused to digest the unusual rule of computational resource redistribution. Distributed games have their own traditions.

*

¶ I realize that this is partly a hallucination, but I have nowhere to seek footing to avoid it. I wander in a wide arc around the city, from the first tower to the seventh, over hummocks, among the trees, tearing through the underbrush. It smells of berries. Of pine needles. My timelessness is tenuous enough; the birds take note of me. I desire counsel. I think, why not ask the largest organism, the mycelium? I begin to seek the most beautiful mushroom. Be it long or short, I find it. It says its name is Klogt. I lay down on the moss. Right onto my right

bony ear. The splendid mushroom no farther than my nose. It suggests I crawl around it directly on my cheek, pushing off with my boots in a circle. I agree. In Klogt's presence, I chastise myself for not feeling guilt and contrition, having killed many, for not knowing a tight sorrow.

¶ "Do you intend to feel grief?" the vast mycelium, threading through the roots of the forest from tower to tower, from bank to precipice, asks me.

¶ "I do intend."

¶ "I forewarn you that I shall give you loss in all its fullness, from fury to nostalgia, loss for those whom you will miss unimaginably more than now. I shall place you in that self-perception and in that time where this will truly be significant. Not at all like now. Not at all like you."

¶ "Give."

¶ "Do you ask for the chief desire?"

¶ "Give."

¶ "Do you ask for a world where you might share it?"

¶ "Give."

¶ "For this, not one soul, but all!"

¶ "I will give."

¶ "Six I shall take."

¶ "Why six?"

¶ "Six valleys of six rivers need six First Rulers."

¶ "But there are five rivers in the world, Klogt."

¶ "Shwell then. A new world, a new River."

*

'A pact with a mushroom?' rang the realization in the Doctor's head. Six—that is five rulers and one void. In the void, one might conceal someone. If Klogt does not notice. He stood ramrod straight—like a guardsman of the presidential regiment. He tugged his tomb-black jacket. He cleared his throat. He was himself slightly taken aback by the affectation of the pose, thrust his hands into his pockets to smooth the impression, but pulled them out immediately—it seemed to him that his fingers had poked into moss.

Then Dr. Aris doubled over and tore the goggles off himself—whether as a bundle of nerves or with the hook of his right wrist. He took an ordinary phone in his left hand and sent a voice message:

"Aethelaid, bright day. Make a formal notation at this date and time—apply the timestamp via the distributed registry. Collect, if you would, data on those who held accounts in the game 'The Seventh Tower.' The older the accounts, the more relevant they are for us. Cross-reference with our entire network of contacts, as well as with their immediate acquaintances. The denser the contact, the better. Optimize according to these two parameters and compile a list by ascending quality within the designated framework. Thank you."

'Permitted me to dream. But did not forewarn me that the nightmare would be so senseless,' the Doctor murmured and plunged back into the game.

*

¶ With each new tiny step of the spiral, I see new garments of the mushroom. Here is a raven's beak. And here a cat's claw. And here chainmail on the statue of an ancient lion. I see an iron point, the bared teeth of a hyena, lacerated skin. On the reverse side, I see a break-paratz, fissures. Paratz-pepper. I feel a riot, a grappling, then something solid but fractured, like a cobblestone street during repairs. Peck there, peck! Grief, tearing at the innards with a base passion to turn all sensation into self-pity. A fury at a flagrant injustice claws at my lungs from within. Stab it!

¶ I rummaged in my pockets, searching for something sharp. I realized I have no pockets. Then I simply squeezed the mushroom with my hands. The forest was filled to the brim with evening, and I began to fear the night. Suddenly, myriads of insects began to ring. Or perhaps my hearing simply returned as the flow of time normalized. Lying on the ground, I felt the cold along my right side. I tried to rise but fell onto all fours. So I crawled. Moss. Everywhere moss. Klogt bade farewell and for an instant revealed its essence: an object fuller, more complete than anything that exists in our dimensions. It is folded into itself and outward simultaneously.

¶ I ran, partly through the forest, partly along the wall, back to my tower. I stand below, I see a low door, I think poorly. The fabric of the multitude {walls, soil, doors}—is one. It sways together with my breath. It is saturated with pitch. The door cannot open without tearing the whole fabric. To displace the door, one must draw the walls toward oneself. I do not pull, I do not rock. I revolve, like a dervish. No, I stand still. I turn the world with the Moon around myself. I

rotate it. The pitchy fabric does not crumple where we stand. I and I. A bulge formed on the tower wall. The low door snaps open, like a mousetrap, with an incongruous sound, a quiet crack. I goes inside. The door closes. And I—am indifferent.

¶ I whistle. After a couple of heartbeats, a heavy bird flutters from its nest and rises a few sazhens, holding the edge of a rope ladder. When the talons disengage, and the ladder unfurls under its own weight downward, I climb it up to the window and smugly think: "I prefer collaboration to be long-term and symbiotic."

⁂

Aris rejoiced at Aethelaid's call—childishly and not childishly at once.

"Hello, Aris," the assistant greeted the Doctor. "The first on the list is a certain academician Haakon. He is not particularly relevant in terms of connections to us, but his account is old. Can you imagine, he was raised in the same orphanage as you. And above all: he was in the university circle for the study of Ithkuil."

"I remember perfectly well who Haakon is," said Aris. "He is also Goodman Heavywall."

"A somewhat strange surname. And his first name too. A Native American?"

"Something like that. But from the other side of the Bering Strait."

"What is an 'academician'?"

"The highest scientific-administrative title, in our terms."

"I looked up what that place is... at his address. You know, the real estate there... Not for an academician."

"I'll reconnoiter on location. I'm flying to him—buy me a ticket, please."

⁂

The airplane was descending, and the city lay below as a gray-green stain, sprawling over the hills. Aris looked out the porthole and listened to the hum of the turbines. The hum was soothing, steady, powerful. This sound promised nothing except that it would carry him to his destination. The turbines care not who you are or why you fly. While boarding the bus on the airfield, people talked about everything at once, but most of all about why the winters here are so long. From the taxi window, he watched as the city woke. Chimneys breathed steam, cars had not yet grown angry, they simply drove, an old trolleybus jerked its wires on

a turn. A gray city under a gray sky. Yet within this silver was its own truth. The city was honest. The city did not know that in one of its apartments lived an old man who did not know he was still alive.

Aris found Acad. Haakon in a ghastly hovel on the eighth floor. He was, naturally, drunk. In the dwelling there were no signs of any other people's presence in Haakon's life. The Doctor had to inject the (evidently former) academician with a special preparation so that a conversation might take place.

"Exploring the bottom?" Dr. Aris inquired, sweeping junk off an armchair. "Are you really interested in whether there's a door there? There's work. As a catalyst."

Along with the empty, crumpled packaging of disposable meals and clothing on which a three-week foulness had congealed, a touching plush mouse fell to the floor. Doctor Aris shamelessly pocketed it, literally stuffing it into his pocket. He reasonably judged that such a cute toy had no place here. At the very least, the Doctor subliminally assumed that a corresponding measure and law exist.

"Theoretically, I'm not against it," Haakon mumbled, letting his lips grow accustomed to reproducing human speech. "But, as you see, I'm a bit busy."

The Doctor did not rush him. After every remark, both his own and Haakon's, he paused. He had no desire to examine the things in the apartment. Nor to look out the window. So he sat like an owl and stared the academician in the face. And the latter—couldn't care less.

"Understood," said Aris. "Sober, it's unbearable at your place here, I won't argue. Do you remember that trip on the bicycle tandem?"

"A week of a battered ass? How could I not remember. After that, things went wrong for me."

"After that, three years passed during which things went wrong for you. And not only for you, for the whole world."

"My deformity—is the inability to ignore the noise," said the academician. "And you know, I can't manipulate. Truth is more important to me than results. What kind of catalyst am I. I gather someone needs cheering up in something? With a chemical degree of efficiency?"

"Do you remember our talk about the Apostle Avertigus?" the Doctor approached the specifics.

"The one who is not a god, but, possibly, a conduit? I remember. Only now I think that all apostles, even those original ones, are simply impostors. PR people."

"That one. It seems to me I've found him."

"Ah. And what will you ask of him?"—Haakon showed a spark of interest for the first time.

"Perhaps I won't ask, but offer. Usually I can only point. I always need an executor. But right now, there is no executor."

"Don't look at me."

"I look only at what I am concealing for now. And there is a place for you there."

"Oh," Haakon waved it off. "Cheap. Life isn't worth the effort. It's a rational choice."

"Too smart, are you?" Aris began to grow heated. "Well, I knew that. Curiosity is stronger than this hole of yours in life. There's a plug thick enough to stopper your bottle."

"Are you telling me you saw something that shouldn't exist?"

"Precisely. Normal people are not your path. With monsters—it just might work out."

"But I'm a freak."

"Listen, I'm not even asking you to live. I'm asking you to help me understand why we are still here. I know the entrance. You know how to survive inside. I hope. That's it. I'll send a description of the task and a plane ticket when I'm ready. Keep your phone charged. Farewell."

Together with the sound of the closing door, Aris heard from within the apartment a hoarse, coughing:

"Find a killer as well..."

The Doctor returned and pulled the door shut behind him as tightly as possible. Kicked in more than once, it refused to sit flush.

"So. Once more," he demanded.

"Will you drink with me?" asked Haakon.

"I'll have one. Why not?" replied Dr. Aris.

"Rummage over there," the academician waved toward a specific piece of furniture.

Finding a non-empty bottle proved no trivial matter. For some reason, they were all of a thick, heavy glass, attempting to conceal—both by the weight of the container and its lowered transparency—the presence of liquid within. On one vessel, the Doctor saw a label that sparked with foolish nostalgia in his memory. He registered the fact of the contents' presence by ear, creating, with a movement of his hand, a discontentedly gurgling vortex within said contents.

The potion flowed into two shot glasses. Before placing the empty glass on the dirty floor, Aris rubbed his palm firmly over the label as a sign of long acquaintance. In response to the greeting, from the thin, long neck flew the last remnant of spirit.

They clinked without a ring and drank this gin.

"I cannot help but trust you that you have correctly assessed the need for a catalyst in your affair. Hence the conclusion..." Haakon rose from the couch and went to the lavatory to blow his nose with a trumpeting sound.

"An inhibitor is also needed. For you, that is," he continued, returning to the couch with a creak.

"Reasonable," the Doctor responded. "But why a killer? You and I have only a single person of that sort in mind. Why on earth do you assess him as an inhibitor? He might have died long ago. When was it? Forty years back?"

"He does not wear down as the process proceeds. Therefore he is an inhibitor."

"You haven't even seen him, whence such a supposition?" the Doctor questioned the correctness of the academician's assessment.

"I myself have long since turned into a cabinet for stabilizing reaction mixtures during storage. I sense it in my gut."

"Gut it is," the Doctor conceded. "Where to look for him?"

Haakon pulled out the phone from under his pillow. It was, of course, completely discharged.

"The OS will take half an hour to load," he said with irritation. "Just let it die, and reviving it afterwards is such eternal torment."

The Doctor saw: the academician needed another drink, but to do so in his presence... Aris helped Haakon rid himself of him more quickly.

"Show me on mine," the Doctor extended his device with a cartographic app pre-launched.

Haakon rubbed his unruly pinch over the display in search of the place, using only the zoom function, without entering letters in the address search bar. Then he poked the pad of his index finger at a point.

"There she, she is," Haakon expressed himself childishly.

The place was designated as "13th-century mill." On the screen, a clear, greasy fingerprint reflected in the side light. The Doctor pocketed the device, with all its contents. Without postponing or complicating the leave-taking with needless futility, he departed for good.

¶

Stream 2. The Illusion of the Head Start: Ratu Joins Aris

¶

A fluid stride. A brisk heel. A knee-length navy-blue skirt. The supple figure of a young woman. The Assyrian beauty of her face. Ratu spotted the needed vehicle from afar. In twenty long beats of a steady heart, she would reach it.

The gray van with a large advertising graffito on its side reading "Charronus Ltd. The Last Courier" was parked in the historic center of the city. Despite the ritual nature of the services offered, the vehicle rode on high, almost bog-worthy wheels. At the front, the cylinder of a powerful winch stood out prominently. The windows were angular. And the windows were not everywhere one normally expected them to be.

Inside, in the rear of the vehicle, sat Doctor Aris. Before him was the monitor of an electro-optical converter, which permitted observation in total darkness at a range of up to five hundred meters. To the left, a screen was mounted on a rigid arm, receiving data from the thermal-imaging system. To the right—a display for the high-magnification visual control optics, which could be switched to the video feed from any of the dozens of drones in the Doctor's arsenal.

A soft scratching came at the van's passenger door from outside. The Doctor shifted inside the van to the driver's seat and pressed the central lock button. A young woman got into the vehicle.

"Thank you, esteemed Chancellor-Secretary Ratu, for agreeing to take part in my project," said the Doctor.

"You're mocking me, Dr. Aris," the woman smiled. "Here, I brought you a bagel with coffee. How could I not take part. You're living for this 'Seventh Tower' now, aren't you? Decided in your old age to make up for all the playtime you missed in your youth?"

"C-s Ratu, how could you..."

"The only way to see cheeks on your hollow face is to level an absurd accusation at you," smiled Aethelaid. "So I took advantage of it."

"I admit it, I live for this project now. It's even strange to call it a project," he pushed the unstarted van's steering wheel with both hands.

Ratu turned to face him, shifting in her seat. To do so, she had to remove one shoe and tuck her left leg under herself. Aris could not help but glance at the knee and foot sheathed in elastic dark gray.

"Well, tell me, dear teacher. Whom are we watching? And why?"

Out of habit, the Doctor used his right hand to push up the glasses that had long since ceased to exist on his face, and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his left thumb and forefinger.

"The man lives in that building over there. See it? It's a mill. A former one, of course. A recluse. I'm here because early this morning some letters were delivered to him..."

"How grandiloquent: 'letters were delivered.' Now I'll say that too when I'm describing a notification in the OS slide-down."

"They were actually delivered. Physical letters. On paper."

"Does that still happen? I didn't know."

"In a few European cities. As part of a tourist ambiance, I suppose. But never mind. There's a chance the letters will be the cause for him to come out. And we'll watch him. And then we'll talk. I need him as a kind of scenarist."

"What's stopping you from just making contact?"

"This fellow shouldn't be taken for an ordinary person. He's something like an NPC—a character that... doesn't play by itself. So there are a whole number of reasons not to initiate contact right away. And some of those reasons I even find hard to put into words."

"Sounds like mysticism. Start with the reasons you can put into words."

The Doctor hesitated for a while.

"You're making me think about things it makes no sense to think about right now," he said finally. "Consider it that I simply want to watch him first."

"Are you being cagey or just lazy? Because if it's the former, then I might just leave. How can I ensure your safety if I don't understand why you're wary of this NPC-freak. We've already had an unpleasant experience. Do tell me."

The Doctor picked up his smartphone, fiddled with it, sending a file to print, then opened the glove compartment. A printer was inside. He made an inviting gesture for her to take the pages.

"What a convenient little device," said Ratu.

"Read. Or rather, let's read it together," he leaned his whole body toward her. "That's why I printed it out."

⁂

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Aris's Log]

¶ I am standing at a window as tall as I am. The window is not wide. I plus I wouldn't fit. A convenient one: you can lie belly-down on the thick, sun-warmed stone surface, leaving your bare feet on the wooden floor, prop your head on your elbows and slowly rotate it from side to side, with your chin snugly settled in your palms. I am in tower number seven—the corner one. Both fortress walls, left and right, recede back in relation to the arrow of my gaze, preventing the life within the city from blocking the view of the forest. Straight cedars like a noble wall some fifty paces away. In the infinity beyond the forest—the spurs of the Great Mountain. The broad fortress moat has dried up, overgrown, and turned into a grand strawberry ravine.

¶ There's no point in maintaining siege discipline—an entire generation has grown up since artillery crews appeared in army units. Maybe not on the first shot, nor the tenth, but they can breach the wall at any point, and over the wall, in a wide arc, lob an incendiary bomb onto any chosen target house. The mighty bridge that once led across the moat stands idle. There is no water under it, and beyond it—there is no open gate in the tower.

¶ From the high window, I see moving along the broad path between forest and wall: a peasant cart, a group of dusty guardsmen with panniers, a couple dozen locals without baggage. On the cart lie three stacks of cart wheels. This is a manifestation of the division of labor. The cart beds are made here, in the city. The wheels—in the village. The village craftsman must have devised something special that allowed him to put wheel production on a stream at a more advantageous price.

¶ The high walls of black stone blocks have lost their military value, yet they continue to fulfill the tasks of maintaining law and order. At the city's entrance, all five gates have selective inspections. The nearest passage is three towers away from here, and I can neither see nor hear the gatehouse bustle. Once there was a

passageway and a guard post in our tower too, but the stonework was supplemented, leaving only a low, chin-high iron door that, in my memory, no one has ever opened.

"What is this 'I sing of what I see'?" asked C-s Ratu.

"This is a game log dump, from the character's point of view. Something like the internal monologue in a chatbot window. Exposition of the economic setting. A lead-in before a gameplay episode."

"An economic/strategy game?"

"Among other things."

"Aris—that's your character?"

"Yes, we're together. The objective is to 'level up' several characters," answered Dr. Aris.

"And there's no way to do it without staking out the leveling specialist at his home in a van loaded with equipment and drones?"

"No way, Ratu, no way," the old man replied. "For now, just trust my gray hairs. You'll see for yourself soon enough."

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Aris's Log]

¶ Now it's a dormitory here, and I, an aspirant of the Academy of Queristry, live here. On the top, fifth floor. I straightened back up into the dim room, pulling the wooden shutters closed behind me. It's a pity to block the sun's path, but I have to leave, and the clouds in the sky, though few, are too dark not to fear a hard slanting rain for the whole coming day. The neighboring sixth tower has stained glass in its windows, shielding against the weather but letting the light through. That would be pleasant, but even if I had an extra ten tellers a Selene for lodging, I wouldn't move there.

¶ Our Septimporta narrows toward the top and ends in a tall, elegant roof, reminiscent of a cabinetmaker's chisel edge. I can touch the tiles directly from my room. The neighboring tower, on the other hand, is cylindrical. Instead of a roof, it has an observation platform for the guards. Moreover, its upper residential floor is much roomier than ours. I would have more neighbors there. And I don't like neighbors. I'm a cautious creature in general. In case of uninvited guests, I want to have a block of larch, a couple of palms thick, to bar the door and buy myself several minutes while I get the rope from the hide. Or a weapon; that will depend on the situation.

¶ Setting up a hide is a great problem. You cannot simply wish it into being. Not in our world. Such an intention must be excluded. If a hide has formed on its own, due to some extraneous circumstances, its use can be considered a crime punishable not by execution. And with enough gold for a pettifogger, one can hope to emerge from the water dry. Hence—the tiles within arm's reach. I spent two full years feeding the birds so they would build a nest there. Considering my income, I went hungry because of those feathered gluttons. But safety is above all. And a neighbor is a necessary evil. He is the first candidate for the role of ruiner of my secret.

"This, I take it, is the inclusion of individual restrictions?" Aethelaid broke off half of the bagel she had brought: "May I?"

"Yes, there are three kinds of restrictions. First, economic ones. Hunger, a roof over your head, legal rights, and similar mundane things. Actually, those come last, really. The main thing is the resource cost of speech."

"How charming," remarked C-s Ratu, "one can't chat gratis?"

"You can, if you speak the all-consuming truth."

"Aha!" Aethelaid drawled knowingly. "Behind the epithet 'all-consuming' lies what I think it does? Well then. Things are beginning to clear up."

"Uh-huh," Aris modestly lowered his gaze.

"Well, all right. Strange that I know so little about this game. What's the third restriction?"

"The speed of experience, the quality of memory, and freedom of will—they crowd each other out."

"I don't get it."

"Better memory—worse compute and random. And the same goes for all the other combinations."

"I still don't get it," Aethelaid's intelligent black eyes teased her teacher.

The Doctor knew how to conduct a briefing with patience, persistence, and a measure of formality.

"If too much computational power is allocated to maintaining the flow of events, memory lapses will appear, and besides that—it will drag you into unpredictable, often needless adventures."

"Whoa. That's harsh," Aethelaid assessed.

Doctor Aris shrugged:

"I've been living that way for over seventy years now. Shall we watch some more?"

"Let's, but I think an indicator on your monitor is flashing. Your charge has stepped outside."

Aris flustered like an old man, spilled the pages onto the floor, switched the monitor's mode. On the screen was a tall, bald young man, dressed extremely "designer"—in stylizations of late European medieval fashion.

"That's not him," Aris said in surprise. "Apparently, his son. What a resemblance, though. Think of that—they're running a dynasty, and in such a way that the clientele doesn't notice the generational change. That's it, let's go. Get behind the wheel."

Aris got up from the driver's seat, stepped into the rear of the van, clearing the passage for Aethelaid. Sitting down in the passenger seat, he began to instruct:

"Follow the navigator. It automatically suggests the van's next parking spot for changing drones. Three are always airborne. In reserve and charging, three times as many. Here's the docking/undocking indicator. It shows you when you can drive off."

"Can't they do it on the move?"

"They can, but it's better not to. The drones are insanely expensive. They're all mother drones."

"Can those banned little 'flies' deploy from them?"

"Yep," Aris muttered. "Look. He's heading to the railway station. As soon as we determine his destination, we'll move to intercept. See here: the navigator has already found us some preliminary spots to wait. We'll stop before the highway interchange so we can quickly jump onto the right heading after."

The van pulled up to the suggested parking spot and stopped. The Doctor set the alarms.

"Let's read on."

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Aris's Log]

¶ The creakiness of the wooden floorboards in the outer corridor is loyal to me —it gives warning of visits a good five heartbeats in advance. I have time to step away from the window and take a handful of nuts; the lock clanks; my neighbor enters the room.

¶ "Bad news came, in the post," he grumbles and stretches out on the pallet, having kicked off his black boots in a flash and propped his heels against a coffer placed by the wall. Seeing my sour face: "Oh, Queen of the Heavenly Threads, I'm just clown-girding... {Hint detected: the neighbor is joking, but at the same time he is prepared, that is, girded. Girded with what? With a tether of lieving, of course} ...I don't know what's in it."

¶ The neighbor theatrically slips his palms into opposite sleeves, as if into a muff, underscoring the fact that he gives himself over to idleness quite deliberately.

"What's with the riddles?" Aethelaid asked in surprise.

"One third of the character is controlled by an external agent..."

"An agent?"

"Something conditionally alive but devoid of its own will. Before the ban on the free roaming of AI agents, these were, properly speaking, AI agents. For a while, human curators using various autopilots were used."

"And now?"

"Oh! 'And now,'" the Doctor parroted back kindly. "That's the whole point. But we'll get to that. As for the 'riddle'... The neighbor's phrase embeds the meaning that he doesn't regret not having looked at what was in the post right away. Although he could have... Every agent, in order to solve multi-step tasks, needs an internal model of the world. If an individual can successfully perform sequences of interconnected tasks, one can algorithmically extract a model of how the world is arranged from his behavior. The better an individual handles long-term goals, the more precise his internal model of reality. Therefore, the neighbor's phrase tells my character that he, the neighbor, achieves long-term goals through an attitude toward life of 'there's no rush.'"

"Right... I'm starting to understand why you need a pro scenarist," said Aethelaid. "Oh! It's flashing again! Shall I drive?"

"Yes, get onto the highway. Our fine fellow is heading south. Well, this will take a while. Let's engage the autopilot now."

"We won't be able to keep pace with a train," Aethelaid expressed doubt.

"Yes, it's a terrible habit some suspicious (and suspecting) people have—to make maximum use of high-speed trains. But that also makes them predictable."

"Exactly. I'm almost certain he's going to a seaport."

"My student!" the Doctor announced with a satisfied look. "A true Chancellor-Secretary. So yes, we'll veer straight east—there's nowhere for ships to go west or south anyway. We'll send the big mother drone—it will carry out a wide intercept over the distance. Turn on the autopilot, let it do its work."

This was no bravado. Aris was genuinely calm. The train, of course, moves fast, but time inside it creates no new future; it merely delivers you more swiftly to a foreknown end. When speed is merely a means to get faster to the place where you are awaited, that kind of speed is empty.

"You're right, dear Aris," said Madam Ratu. "The harbor never asks how fast you sailed towards it. Ever since the days of the honorable Phileas, it's been known that knowing the schedule matters more than the engine's power."

The van moved in the direction of the Mediterranean Sea. The Doctor had a store of food. There was also a microwave oven in the vehicle. Aris was comfortable in the company of his student. They could spend hours in silence, watching as the landscape outside the window gradually changed toward the southeast.

¶

Stream 3. The Dance of the Hydrodynamicist

¶

Knowing the world can be cognized in two ways—to set out on a journey or to let the world revolve around you—Jingo the hydrodynamicist, satiated with his own impunity, preferred to sit for hours at a window. This window had not been opened to him by science, art, or any other lofty insight. It was the window of a watermill.

A reclusive way of life has its advantages, and impunity, paradoxically, fosters curiosity.

The post of "hydrodynamicist" entailed long seasonal holidays, which favored observation. From his windows opened a view of the roads and bridges traversed by nearly all the locals and many of the foreigners who visited the subcontinent. Wayfarers were bound for the great cathedrals, and the islet formed by the river and the diversion canal with its dam, dug centuries ago for this mill, had become a crossroads.

The mill's attic could not accommodate his considerable height in its corners, but it jutted out over the wall like a starling house—so the winch receiver would work. Three windows—on every side but the west. The hydrodynamicist, who had been sitting by the window, rose and, with a practiced motion, caught up from the floor the line that ran downward, beneath the boards. This was how he usually hauled up his post: if one can hoist sacks of grain, why not do the same with a mailbox? He had reasoned thus very long ago and had used this simple device ever since. Today, however, the rope had been cut.

The hydrodynamicist stumbled slightly over this circumstance, but he did not grow upset or even curse: it would have been unwise to needlessly magnify the loud name of Beelzebub by taking it in vain. He went down to check the box and returned with two letters. This posed no difficulty. The hydrodynamicist has a rather youthful face and a sturdy muscular frame. He is also bald—out of a dislike for excess.

He descended to the second floor. A set of stone millstones reigned here. The window was shuttered, the rushlight had burned out. The hydrodynamicist had

preserved this state of affairs on account of a protracted off-season—epochal, as he joked to himself. From the stairs leading upward to the stairs leading down wound a dark path. This was grime ingrained over the centuries into the flour. The flour, in turn, had become one with the floor. Though it is unknown what is primary here; perhaps it would be more correct to define the direction of the path in reverse. It is not at all obvious which is more important: to ascend or to descend.

The hydrodynamicist descended to the first floor and noted that the air on the lower tier was somewhat damp. To prevent the same on the residential third floor, he deftly kindled the hearth. Then he inspected the entire narrow, three-story edifice. With satisfaction he registered the click of the sole vacancy—the absence of a ball—in the neck bearing. He blessed the waterwheel standing three men high. For the many-thousandth time he thanked his former self for having chosen a breastshot mill; here the water does not fall onto the wheel from above but pushes it from the side, downward, so the noise is soothing. The fire took hold. Now it was warm here.

⁂

The hydrodynamicist's penal knife is beautiful. It is not thinned by empty carving. It bears no ostentatious inlays. The engraving reads: "When the white light touches the heart—the ordinary body melts." The hydrodynamicist used the knife in an untraditional manner. He did not slice the envelope in midair. Instead, pressing it against a block, he cut off the entire edge. For some time now, the changed construction of envelopes had made this approach more convenient. For the one thousand and seventh time his hand did not waver, and the cut came out clean.

The letter opened first bore on its envelope the motto "Vain is the sword and vain is the bow." The missive contained a request from Prince ***. The hydrodynamicist did not know the prince personally, but was acquainted with his treatise on the theory of statelessness. The prince drew attention to a sketch by Count NN, whom the hydrodynamicist had chanced to meet face to face. In this sketch—more a lampoon—the count verbosely and with bias called for aid to some husbandmen, the few members of a certain spiritual movement who were, by his account, suffering persecution at the hands of local authorities. Material support was not required. What was needed was advice as to which lands they had best migrate to, as well as assistance in reaching an accord with the authorities there.

The hydrodynamicist understood a thing or two about husbandry. A mill is not simply a factory of its era. A mill serves as a gathering place—at times, people queued up here. There were such crowds that prostitutes came and offered their services, strolling along the waiting line. From such examples the hydrodynamicist had learned to see counterflows: high demand led to satiation and depravity, and that, in turn, threatened catastrophe. Thus, for instance, Saint Bernard in the 12th century was incensed beyond measure on hearing of harlots at the mills, and even wanted to shut down certain mills by his authority. Had such a thing occurred, Europe might never have become great. Fewer mills—thinner the flow of energy, scantier the being. However, the hydrodynamicist allowed that Bernard had been selective and prejudiced before he became a saint.

Noticing that he had become distracted, the hydrodynamicist without delay wrote a reply in the spirit that he had an idea where exactly the climate and other conditions might prove favorable. He was glad to help good husbandmen, yet he had misgivings regarding their peculiar communal economic system. Therefore, before issuing such a recommendation to the authorities at the point of destination, he himself would go to the places of the sect members' current residence, to see its representatives in person and study their situation. He even indicated an approximate date for his visit. And, in order not to accumulate unfinished business, he at once went down to the mailbox and placed his letter into it. The postman would collect it the next morning, should the flow of time persist.

The envelope opened second brought a routine commission for the elimination of a person harmful to society.

The hydrodynamicist decided to occupy himself with this after breakfast. And he could just as well have done so straight away, even before breakfast. The thing was, for many years he had taken a lively interest in the industry in which the future corpse labored. He very much needed a service that the target's enterprise might render. He could not buy such a service—that would reveal his explicit intention, and that would destroy his impunity. The impunity already mentioned more than once, he found repellent, of course, but its absence was incompatible with life. The needed service could be made use of only if it fell at his feet of its own accord, like overripe fruit. Besides, he did not have the required sum. But by fulfilling the commission, he would unwittingly destroy an industrial empire, and one of its fragments would bestow the service upon him voluntarily. More precisely, on its own initiative.

The hydrodynamicist experienced a strong excitement and vigorously rubbed his palms together. In his spine arose that sensation when a dull ache that had tor-

mented you for whole days suddenly departs. Yet he held that the discipline he had fully mastered allowed him to see much, but still only what reveals itself through the window. And that regardless of whether he traveled or not. Therefore, he reasoned, one should not forgo breakfast by the window, no matter how impatient one was to attend to a promising affair.

⁂

The hydrodynamicist stepped out of the Mill with a small knapsack on his back. He cast a glance at the mailbox bearing the inscription "Asiyab." He hung a sign on the door. Slipping his hand into his trousers, he plucked a pubic hair and adhered it an inch above the ground, between the door leaf and the side jamb—if the door were opened in his absence, he would see the signal upon his return. The glue for such a routine happened to be stashed right there, under a cobblestone. An attentive observer might say it is no simple matter to pull a stone from a cobbled street. Still more so if one requires that the fact of its being periodically removed, violating its proper setting, remain unnoticed. And such an observer would be right. He merely does not know that solid-state physics is entirely obeyed only by truly solid bodies. And the water Mill is a liquid, fluid affair.

The hydrodynamicist saluted the door and the whole Mill, but he tarried because of the appearance in the mill-adjacent square of a group of tourists. When they approached the building, he silently erased the thirteen-degree tilt of the sign hanging on the door reading "Museum Closed," with a demonstrative gesture leveling it to the horizon. The tourists, shifting, opened a direct line of sight from the nearest parking lot to his door—let them see.

⁂

Sitting in a carriage of the racing train, the hydrodynamicist set his feet on a special ledge built into the seat ahead. From the welt of his right boot he drew a very long three-edged awl. An uninformed person might take it for the little brother of an under-barrel bayonet from the First World War. But no, it is no relation, not even an acquaintance. The thing is, when one looks at an ordinary bayonet from the side, three pronounced longitudinal fullers are visible, which creates the illusion of a three-edged form. The term "three-edged" has taken hold in popular speech and even in some textbooks, though it is technically incorrect. All official bayonets are four-edged. An experienced man, however, understands: thrusting a bayonet in is simpler than drawing it out of half-dead flesh. A three-edged blade, at equal friction, is thirteen percent easier. Anyone who wishes may

readily be convinced of this by comparing the perimeters of the cross-sections and the corresponding volumes of the blades. It would be foolish to ascribe to the hydrodynamicist some unfounded attachment to the number thirteen. Such is the geometry. As for the assertions of two good chaps, Guillaume and Charles, concerning the laws of friction, the hydrodynamicist knew for a fact that neither of the two had ever had occasion to plunge a weapon into human flesh.

So, a three-edged blade is lighter, and excess weight in important matters is ruinous. Including in the business of minikin robomechanics.

From the left welt the hydrodynamicist drew a musat of hardened steel. As he subjected the first facet to steeling, he began to ponder the subject of the commission received in the letter. He surveyed the near future of the involved subjects. In particular, the general of the accelerometer market, the victor of the microactuator wars, the conqueror of the spaces of minikin robomechanics. In the air around the general already hovered the perfidy of a brittle lady—his wife. Of course, he himself would be to blame. A revel in an ancient imperial town. The general compels his spouse (in full view of everyone) to drink wine from her father's skull. Oh, that father! The lady's eyes would then blaze with hatred, her hands would tremble, but she, of course, would not be able to disobey her husband—she would drink the wine. And the seeds of vengeance would sprout in her heart. So, what suggestion or manipulation would impel the general to such a senseless performance?

"What are you inventing, Hydrodynamicist," his blade chided him, "what are these intrigues for?"

"Hack the data, destroy," the musat echoed to the awl, appealing to a hacker's sobriety, "do not multiply entities. The client will revile you and reproach you for being an empty space."

"But I am an empty space. If it works, don't touch it! That is the first commandment of a programmer," the hydrodynamicist waved them off. "In Lombardy, where the three of us are bound, it already happened that way."

"You speak true, honored toiler," agreed the instruments, having rummaged through their long memory. "It did. And not with just anyone, but with the first of the first."

The hydrodynamicist worked the musat without looking, relying solely on tactile sensation. His gaze was directed out the window, where a highway stretched parallel to the rail line. The hydrodynamicist regarded the passengers of the cars

with well-founded hauteur. Not on account of the train's higher speed. The wheels of cars, unlike the wheels of the carriages, did not periodically say "kyatz," leaving motorists without a fruitful tether to the flow of time.

The hydrodynamicist set the musat to the second facet and picked up the tempo slightly, from sostenuto to allegretto. The general's lady and her retinue interested the hydrodynamicist no more than individual cartridges in a revolver. He did, however, consider it useful to dry each of the cartridges individually. Let us see, let us see. The general's lady took up with her husband's deputy and adjutant, who was not averse to occupying the place of his master. The conspirators would not want to stain their hands with blood and would attempt to win over to their side the palace steward and the captain of the family yacht. Unsuccessfully. The enraged lady would have to resort to extreme measures. The deputy murders the majordomo, and the lady, on a moonless night, would slither like a snake into the bed of her maid, whom the captain was wont to visit.

On the third facet of the awl-bayonet the steel musat, already groaning steadily, recounted to the hydrodynamicist that the captain, in the darkness, would not notice the substitution. And when all was finished, the perfidious woman would reveal her face and present the sailor with a choice: either the general (along with the forensic physician) learned of the rape of the family queen, or you kill the general. This cunning operation would bring happiness to neither the organizers nor the executor, and the empire of minikin robomechanics would crumble. For lack of a fourth facet, the hydrodynamicist no longer thought further; he savored the fact that a good plan is half the job. And a plan resting on a ready-made artifact is four-fifths.

A digital scan of the father, together with his mythical skull, had already been stashed away in the hydrodynamicist's arsenal for some ten years. A remarkable, comprehensively elaborated image. Not a top-tier character, but a collector's item. The hydrodynamicist took pride in this work. Even slightly regretted expending it. Although it is for such activity that artifacts are created. In the Old World, there are only half a thousand families capable of creating processes. If one observes them long enough (and the hydrodynamicist had observed them long enough), one can find a key to each. Not in the phraseological sense, no. Precisely as a thing one can touch—but most importantly, hide. For the time being.

The hydrodynamicist fell asleep.

At the train's terminal station, he was somewhat impolitely asked to leave the carriage. Rudeness breeds rudeness, especially on waking, and so the freshly-steeled three-edged awl performed an intracranial measurement on the boor, from the mandible to the region of the dorsum sellae in the sphenoid bone. It would be a mistake to consider this act a tsujigiri, that is, a knight's authorized testing of his new or renewed weapon on the first passerby. The hydrodynamicist took the honored teachers of the past very seriously in all matters, and they asserted that killing without cause was punished (true, only by law) even as far back as the Edo period. And now it was the forties of the twenty-first century. Proceeding from the rule of "earlier was better," one could conclude that at present it was worthwhile to exercise caution with regard to external video surveillance cameras. And the hydrodynamicist demonstrated to himself, by means of his available special tools, the necessary pragmatism.

Since the mission led the wayfarer to the maritime station, thither he went. He bought a ticket at the counter with cash, waited a couple of hours, and boarded a sea ferry.

⁂

"The old man the boat," said the hydrodynamicist. "Zoho-zoho."

He stood on the eighth deck. Against his hip brushed a chain on which a sign reading "Crew only" dangled in the wind, though it was unclear what military reinforcement was intended. His interlocutor (on the other side of the rail) was the former mentor of that scoundrel who had become the captain of the robototechnical magnate's yacht. Of course, the hydrodynamicist's remark meant simply "The elders steer the vessels." However, according to his many years of practice, the processing of sentences with syntactic ambiguity is accompanied by an increase in eye regressions. Thus, sentences that create a false trail provide fodder for personality analysis through pupil behavior.

As for methods of work, the hydrodynamicist trusted entirely in the old school alone, for as early as 1114 it was said: "We are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants." Yet, though he had devised the system for working with those of short thoughts long before the advent of computational devices, he did not disdain novelties, and everything related to constructing characters online he had mastered first on the planet. In this epoch—most assuredly so.

The hydrodynamicist conversed amiably with the hapless crew member for about half an hour. The mechanism was set in motion. As the object of manipulation withdrew to his wheelhouse, the little kegs of his mild obesity (from a

good life) bobbed charmingly, proving that the programming had gone unnoticed.

The hydrodynamicist, meanwhile, to avoid compositional flabbiness, flew like a bullet to the uppermost deck, deserted owing to the foul weather, and distinctly pronounced eight times, turning to each of the rays of the Great Wind Rose: "I am. All that is not mine by right of free choice returns to non-being." Then he began to spin, shouting curses in all directions. The profanations were explicitly addressed to everyone who was on the vessel, as well as on the nearest vessels on this busy sea lane. The hydrodynamicist was inventive both in his movements and in his retorts.

Thus he warded off bad dreams. This was a new invention. The knacker from Tiflis proved in practice in 1811 that by covering a church bell with curses—the tolling of which had allowed yet another stray cur to escape capture—you set the world's balance aright. And most importantly, his countryman and contemporary confirmed it. By virtue of his duty, he woke the whole town each morning with the factory whistle, naturally eliciting curses directed at himself in doing so. Therefore he would beforehand heap abuse on the whole neighborhood, so as to whistle with impunity afterwards.

"Let not my will be done, pray..." spoke the qilin step fashioned by the hydrodynamicist. The monkey step added: "I whirls the instant." "I dances the shout of the circle," pronounced his gu. The pan echoed: "I draws forty torments." "A ringing into the head, unevenness under the feet, a bow to the water," completed the movements over the three-by-three grid ("the nine palaces").

The hydrodynamicist worked according to a reliable scheme. He regarded the consequences of dark deeds not as sound in water or air, but as waves far swifter and more elastic. As interactions in an ionized gas. And precisely waves were for him the primary entities, and not at all the people, whose "charge" (that is, behavior) ensures the propagation of the waves. People are but roads and crossroads along which move dense packets of endless intentions, causes, effects, and retributions.

⁂

"What is it you are dancing so vigorously?" In a niche between technological casings, on the slick-from-sea-spray surface of a ship's searchlight, a girl sat pressing her knees to her chest. She asked the question loudly, striving to overcome not only the noise of the sea foul weather but also the earphones absent from the hydrodynamicist's ears.

The girl's question gladdened the hydrodynamicist. More precisely—aroused him. Human life, as is known, consists of flows of passion, vice, and goodness. The hydrodynamicist had mastery only over the eddies in the category of vice: no retaliation from the world's will threatened him for what he had done. This was no free gift; he had labored much to make it so. And so far it had worked out that way. In the remaining two components he remained vulnerable and even deprived. He granted, however, that it was not for him to reckon how much is enough and just, and how much is not.

The hydrodynamicist set aside anticipation. For now, he had to occupy himself with extricating himself from the predicament regarding the question about the earphones. He risked a little:

"Intracranial 'earphones' inside the skull," he tapped his finger on his temple, ceasing his "dervish-in-obscenity" dance. The hydrodynamicist reasoned it was better to pass for "chipped" than for insane.

He offered the girl his hand so that she might more easily climb out of the niche.

"Jump off the search phara—it's slippery," he said.

Graciously taking his hand, but compensating with a shrug in the sense of "none of your business," the girl twisted her lips in a retort that leveled an accusation at third parties:

"Have you heard that the organizers of this 'earphone service' were forced to flee to the New World? It is eugenics. Everyone knows that."

While the hydrodynamicist digested the sensation of the fireflies of electricity from her touch and pondered whether it was worth getting embroiled in defending the good name of Mr. Darwin's cousin, the girl left the deck. In any case, the hydrodynamicist had his own affairs to attend to.

¶

Stream 4. The Ingesting of People and Machines into the Stream

¶

For the span of about an hour, the van's occupants applied the greatest invention of mankind—the division of labor. Aethelaid settled in the rear compartment, taking on the observation of the target. Aris, meanwhile, worked with the informational background. He sifted through the automobiles that could, with a high degree of probability, end up on the ferry. Priority, naturally, went to special-purpose transport. Such vehicles, like their own van, could conceal a second layer. But even ordinary passenger cars—be they green or blue, Fiats or Lorraine-Dietrichs, dirty or clean—were subjected to analysis and cross-referencing with databases. In an extreme case, cars on deep autopilot could serve as a mobile shield, preventing undesirable guests from coming aboard. Aris did not soil his hands. He merely deformed context in subtle ways.

"That's it. He boarded a sea ferry," Aethelaid reported, turning away from the monitor. "Shall we go to the port of arrival?"

"No. We'll maintain the shortest possible distance to the vessel."

"In a physical sense?"

"Yes. A geodesic one."

"Are we losing contact with the patient himself?"

"Why would we? I'll release some bees and beetles," Aris pointed at the monitor tracking the position of a microdrone swarm. "Well, shall we read the log?"

"Can I get some sleep, Doctor? I came straight to you from the plane."

"Sleep," the Doctor replied without offense. "There's a couch back there, as you can see."

⁂

A couple or three hours later, Aethelaid awoke:

"Shall we continue?"

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Aris's Log]

¶ The cast of personal assessment the speaker imparts to his phrases makes me decide not to delay. I hurry down to the post shelves. Five floors in a former battle tower is an abyss. Ee-ekh—I fly down the flights, slapping my bare feet on the cool stones. I love simple procedures. The jump… too loud. Stone floors, unlike wood, have never been kind to me.

"What's with this self-reflection from the character?" asked C-s Ratu.

"Three control centers in each character. Sometimes one or two can be suppressed. One may be suppressed almost permanently. For that, you need so-called firmabiders. But two centers are always there—they play a kind of ping-pong of self-reflection."

"Are they equal in rights?"

"No, of course not. At any given moment there's a dominant one. Otherwise the character couldn't take a single step."

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Aris's Log]

¶ "Hey," with impudent brevity the castellaness hails me, having peered out at the noise from her little chamber. In treachery, her right eye turned askew.

¶ "Falsity!" I invoke the bramble silently and, moreover, thought-silently, not allowing the curse to sprout into communication.

¶ "Hello, as a matter of fact," I say calmly; and add for the proper fullness of the phrase: "auntie Cloudo."

¶ I know what she wants from me, and so, preventively, in this retort of mine there speeds an aesthetic concept that extols simplicity, impermanence, and natural imperfections. I find beauty in the non-uniformity of time's flow. But the old woman who stands before me full-face does not. Arms akimbo, swollen legs set shoulder-width apart.

¶ I've snagged myself on a dialog with an anchor phrase. I should have gone into disregard mode and walked on past, but now I'll have to employ sabotage. She is in a state of boredom. This unpleasant state arises when it is impossible to reach an optimal level of arousal of consciousness through interaction with the environment. Boredom sets in when a being renounces activity that corresponds to its values.

¶ "Dress and come out for the cleaning of the tower-adjacent grounds; you and your neighbor, both or all three of you, are shirking; this is your direct duty, each new Selene."—Cloudo points a finger upward, into the sky. In that same direction, an infinitely white, finest thread of lieving flashed from her head for an instant.

The Chancellor-Secretary raised her eyebrows in surprise:

"Who is that now?"

"One of the admins, who else," Aris answered impatiently. "Read on."

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Aris's Log]

¶ "Look here, Aris," noted Cousin from the pocket, "she's bored without the skies, she envies you who have come down from the heights."—"What to do, Cousin, what to do. Let the reasoning creature be bored."

"Wait. And who is this?"

Aris spat in frustration, virtually.

"That's the firmabider. I mentioned it. To free up one of the three control slots. To remove an unnecessary helmsman, my character has... a pocket-not-a-pocket... a hidey-hole. Between the shoulder blades, on the inside of the doublet, on the lining. That's where a little tailed burrow-dweller lives. Goes by the name of Cousin. Sometimes I don't even mind exchanging a couple of phrases with her, though she is, it must be admitted, impolite to the point of insufferability. But she doesn't meddle. Just prattles from time to time. An insignificant detail. Watch on."

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Aris's Log]

¶ "With all due respect, isn't it your duty to change our bedclothes every third Selene?" I snap back...

¶ I am kind, but I have done kindness to no one. Therefore I add to the formal coloring of my retort the indisputable fact that I am an actual aspirant of the Academy of Queristry. I left an even hole in the phrase for understatement. In that niche there remained room precisely for the fact that Cloudo had performed her duties at a five-star level. On a twenty-point scale...

¶ Irritated, I spread my hands in a little ball in a resolute and indignant, yet inversion-distorted, indignor.

"All phrases, retorts are strictly regulated, I take it?"

"Yes, of course. The log is a translation, a simplification."

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Aris's Log]

¶ "You are but a not-yet-expelled aspirant-correspondent, and not an actual aspirant at all. Your attempt, however, to substitute a formal definition with a functional one, coupled with your motive for the utterance, smacks of a dozen lashes. In your motive, besides the sly 'scholarly striving for query,' there is an irrational wish to insult me, a premeditated intention to undermine the authority of the regulation..."

¶ Finding no sign of repentance on my physiognomy, it asks: "Shall I go on?" I begin to shape the phrase that, though the concept of "castellan" indeed derives historically from the honorable post of "keeper of the castle," that is, a fortress, and though the garrison instructions have not been rewritten for a good century, this by no means implies full correspondence to the current reality, and nowadays—she is merely an auntie who must see that the dormitory's inhabitants are laundered on time...

¶ But I changed my mind.

"And here will be my unprofessional attempts to influence the game," Aris said and added impatiently: "Read."

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Aris's Log]

¶ If the individual's attention is successfully engaged, then small efforts and low metacognitive awareness are associated with a sensation of dissolving in the process, not of boredom. And she certainly feels boredom. Which means attention is not engaged. And so we act differently: I wince in a long-suffering way, as if to answer her question: "Don't go on."

¶ And I do not miscalculate. Bingo: I receive a promise! The individual always has a free choice as to what intention precisely to include in his utterance. Most often these intentions concern himself. But sometimes the intention is directed at the one being addressed. And the simplest, classic intention is a bare conditional promise. Having received a promise, one can simply cut the corresponding tether of lieving and take it for oneself.

"Threads, as I understand, are a kind of counter to the ability to measure lies?"

"Broadly—yes. A bit more convoluted, but yes."

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Aris's Log]

¶ "I'll slap a fine on you if you don't do it by the end of the day," she nodded her promise at the wheelbarrow with a broom and a shovel standing under the staircase landing. With relief I recorded the retort as an obligation.

¶ I smile into my shoulder: "she'll get bored and forget, surely."

"So you're counting on an error in the admin's behavior?" Aethelaid said, surprised. "Isn't that a bit too strange?"

"Precisely. The frequency of such errors is exactly what signals the dynamic of the game's rebirth from within."

On one of the monitors an alarm suddenly began to flash.

"What's that?" Aethelaid made out nothing new in the image of the ferry coursing through the sea.

"Something unusual was registered. And it has already passed. Rewind it."

The picture showed the same ferry. The auto-observer took for an anomaly the fact that a powerful ship's searchlight had switched on and off for a time.

"Morse code?" Aethelaid guessed.

"Possibly. Run it through on that assumption, if you would. What do you get?"

After a while, Mdm. Ratu produced the result:

"6174."

"Ordinary binary Morse? Dot-dash?"

"What other kind is there?" Aethelaid asked, surprised.

"Well, there you are," Aris smiled. "That's why it wasn't worth barging in to greet him right away. I was right."

"What number is that?"

"Didn't you note the number of this van when you got in?"

"Oh! Forgive me, teacher. I've grown quite lax in recent years."

"Well then, let's look for a spot on the shore. We're flying to the ship."

⁂

The van had no side doors—neither sliding nor ordinary. Nor were there any windows in the rear section. Though what hearse has windows. The rear exit, on

the other hand, was equipped with a freight lift. Which is also explicable. This was the equipment the Doctor used to unload a powerful collapsible drone.

"My own invention," he kicked the unassuming box on its side. "I leave it just anywhere. Nobody's set eyes on it in years."

In its folded state, the drone presented itself as a utilitarian case that might be taken for some sort of electrical distribution box in the municipal grid. The gray-silvery paint was chipped. Beneath it showed another layer of paint—a dirty green. Both paints were of appalling quality. Like the metal itself. Even more careless was the lettering composed of senseless letters and digits.

Unfolded, however, it was a cargo drone with eight propellers. Aris and Aethelaid donned climbing harnesses, placed themselves back to back, and clipped together. The Doctor lifted the drone a couple of meters, they hooked on the line, and flew over the waves.

The flight took no more than half an hour. The navigator had timed the stop to offer the shortest route to the moving vessel, accounting for all the required leads and the wind. By the time they hovered above the sea ferry, it was already dark. The Doctor used the thermal imager to spot a deserted place on one of the upper decks, and they alighted on the vessel. Leaving the folded drone right on the deck, where it visually blended with other metal casings of a purpose obscure to most, the guests-from-the-sky headed below to the cabins.

Aris walked the corridors for quite a prolonged while, literally sniffing something out. Then, in several places, he pressed something like a suction cup from a medical stethoscope against the wall. Finally, he reported:

"Here it's clean and empty."

Without visible effort he opened the door with a programmable key-card. They entered. The Doctor took from his belt-pouch curtains of a foolish pattern, made of the finest fabric. He struggled for about five minutes, hanging them.

"Camouflage," he explained.

"What if a chambermaid visits?"

"Money is no problem now," he said, passing a wad of bills to Aethelaid. "Please don't wake me on account of it."

He made his bed on the sofa in the sitting room, leaving the bedroom for Aethelaid, and instantly, in a manner entirely un-old-man-like, fell asleep.

¶

Stream 5. Eight-Odd Seconds from Edge to Edge

¶

By the window sat the hydrodynamicist. At breakfast, as if at home. A serene contrast after the underwater cell where he had spent the night. A cabin below the waterline—with blank walls. Like a dungeon in the skete of an enemy order. Certain things, the hydrodynamicist noted, possess ultimate value. A porthole, even if only the diameter of a dessert plate, is incommensurably better than its absence. The hydrodynamicist savored his oatmeal, the sea beyond the window, and also snared any ownerless grain of merriment that fell within his reach. It would be nice, he thought, if that girl took part in the pumping of joy.

The ship's restaurant was crowded: breakfast, unlike lunch and supper, was included in all tickets. The atmosphere was serene. In a Proustian way it smelled of the old good world. Several aged television sets, suspended from the low ceiling, silently showed an ancient cartoon from the 1940s. Enormous windows in the sloping walls. The walls—if you extended them mentally upward—converged to a point above the oval perimeter.

The hydrodynamicist suspended from it an imaginary pendulum with an oscillation period of sixteen and thirty-seven hundredths of a second—he had counted how many times the vessel had pitched in the last three hundred seconds and averaged it. Or half that—the motion from edge to edge. Eight-odd seconds. Rolling is a direct projection of motion in a circle. In the absence of the Mill's habitual rotation, a tolerable and necessary compromise—the years of seclusion were taking their toll. And there was no entity in this world—ordinary or higher—to challenge the absurdity of these calculations. In this particular world.

The hydrodynamicist began to follow the oscillations. Tock-tock. Truth dwells in folds. An ideal pendulum cannot be deceived by burden: it does not sway under the weight of guilt or slander; its period, the neatness of its beat, depends solely on the joy of its radius.

Bringing with her the scent of linden, that very girl sat down beside him. With identical arc-like, and more precisely—cycloidal, motions she transferred three plates and a glass from her tray to the table and said:

"I'm Emma. We didn't manage to get acquainted yesterday."

The hydrodynamicist relished the movement of her pelvis as she seated herself, then glanced around: were there other free seats? Emma understood his intent and gifted him a half-smile, surprisingly fitting this morning on this deck.

"Jingo," replied the hydrodynamicist.

"A strange name. But I like it," said the girl. And corrected herself: "Or rather, a pleasant name, but there's a strangeness in it."

"Rearranging the addends changes the sum," smiled Jingo.

"So where does such a name come from?"

"Dad was a conjurer."

"And?"

"'Hey, Jingo'—a professional interjection."

"Mm. What did you do afterward with the searchlight you drove me off so insistently? And don't deceive me: I saw you blinking Morse code," Emma camouflaged the ambiguity of her curiosity with a movement of her head such that her long orange crescent earrings described semicircles. Jingo admired the dance of the strands of her bob.

"6174," he answered.

"You signaled a number? Is that a cipher?"

"A riddle. A diversion."

"Must I pull it out of you with pincers? What does it mean?"

"A special number with a useless property."

"And?" she opened her palm from a little fist like a fan.

Jingo took his notepad and wrote out for her a few simple arithmetical operations, including that if you divide 6174 by 377.15 (that is, 377 cars and 15 scooters—that's how many there are on this ferry), it yields 16.37. If that is seconds, then the length of an ideal pendulum with such a period is curious and amusing.

"Are you occupied with some kind of nonsense?" From Emma's tone it felt as though she had not grown the least bit more amused.

The hydrodynamicist swallowed, caught the smell of the detergent with which the deck had been swabbed that morning, and continued his observation of the pendulum.

⁂

Suddenly a young woman of vivid Central American appearance, in a formal women's business suit of blue color, approached them. The skirt reached exactly to mid-knee.

"Good morning. I am Chancellor-Secretary Ratu. My boss," she said, addressing the hydrodynamicist, and nodded toward the table where an elderly, lean gentleman sat, "believes he once knew your father. You bear an astonishing resemblance. He is interested whether you are part of a dynasty. If so, he has a commission for you."

"Apply the proper format of address," Jingo replied dryly, and the woman, not in the least embarrassed, left in silence.

It is reasonable to suppose, the hydrodynamicist reckoned, that this pair has been following him since the Mill itself, and that the line at the Mill had been cut by them in order to photograph the hydrodynamicist at the mailbox, without the blurring effect of the mica window. But now their time had apparently run out: having identified one ostensible partner—Emma—they had decided to "lock in the profit" and move on.

This was an excellent sign: those whose surveillance the hydrodynamicist had failed to notice for an entire day must possess potential. The affair might be worthwhile. The hydrodynamicist brought his heart rate variability into correspondence with the 16.37-second cycle. In similar fashion he ordered the cortical hemodynamic oscillations. The myoelectric activity of the stomach was shoved into the same framework.

Jingo took in his hands a packet of tea, one of those that are individually sealed. Tearing along the tiny notch at the corner, he set about extracting the paper sachet from inside with two fingers.

"You shouldn't tear along the notch, but across it," Emma remarked. "Then you won't have to dig around."

"Hm… You think so?" Jingo was surprised.

"Try it," Emma suggested. "Tear mine."

And indeed, it worked.

"Decades I've been doing it wrong," uttered the hydrodynamicist.

"Decades, you say. You can't be given more than thirty."

"The boundaries of one's own applicability are murky," he murmured.

Emma scanned his discomfiture, disproportionate to the situation.

"Some mistakes have a point," she supported Jingo.

"Huh?" he didn't understand.

"Well look, for example," she nodded her charming chin toward the television. "Do you know why in old cartoons the wheels of fast-moving cars, carriages, and the like are drawn as slightly slanted ovals and not circles?"

"It looks faster somehow," Jingo answered uncertainly.

"How would that be. No. It's simply that the photographs of the time captured the wheels of racing autos exactly that way. The shutter moved physically, top to bottom. The wheel had time to travel sideways during the exposure. Do you see?"

"Yes," he admitted, reevaluating Emma. "That explains everything."

Ratu approached, silently placed an envelope on the table, and at once stepped away. The envelope bore the shipping company's insignia. It had evidently just been purchased at the purser's desk. The hydrodynamicist did not cut off its edge, as he had done on the previous thousand and seven occasions, though the knife was on him, in the pocket of his dark-green frock coat. No need to demonstrate to Emma a ritual devoid of practical meaning. He opened the missive: "I require character development services in the decentralized game 'The Seventh Tower' based on an account belonging to Academician Haakon. Respectfully, Doctor Aris."

"Look," Jingo slid the sheet toward the girl.

"I don't believe you, Jingo, don't bother. You and your pals," she nodded toward the Doctor's table, "are pulling my leg."

The hydrodynamicist felt disappointment. This, however, did not throw off his observations of the pendulum.

'The Doctor is no simple man,' Jingo reckoned. And decided: 'Let me ask for the maximum.' Jingo's vexation played a key role in this decision. Vexation not infrequently pokes its nose where it doesn't belong.

"Procure me a little envelope like that," said Jingo, pressing his right palm to his heart.

The girl departed, and the hydrodynamicist, on a sheet torn from his notepad, set out his price to the Doctor: "One hundred and one grams of payload in a probe launching toward Jupiter." When Emma returned, he sealed the reply and asked her to carry the envelope to the Doctor just as Ratu had done before.

The Doctor ran his eyes over Jingo's counter-proposal, looked at him across the hall, and nodded. He stood up at once and headed for the exit. Ratu came over with a swift step and invited them to follow the Doctor to his cabin. Jingo made to say goodbye to Emma for a time, turned to her, but Ratu said:

"No-no. Just the two. That is fundamental."

Jingo shrugged. Emma wavered only an instant.

⁂

The Doctor's enormous luxury suite was curtained with semitransparent striped drapes of an inappropriate yellow color. On the presentation screen blazed the words "The Seventh Tower." In the lower right corner, in small letters, was noted: "co-eugenics." The letter "c" in the copyright symbol was in a double circle, declaring, apparently, that the copyright itself was also intellectually protected. Emma made terrible, doubly rounded eyes at the hydrodynamicist, flicking her gaze from the corner of the screen to Jingo and back, but he, by glance alone, ordered her to be silent.

"Why was I shadowed?" Jingo began the conversation artlessly.

"Everything in its time," Aris replied, pointing at the screen. His suit, black as that of a soul-seller, was lit by stripes of yellow, which turned the Doctor into a bee. This effect came about only because Aris's movements were extremely spare. Were he not hanging in one spot like a hummingbird on the hunt, the illusion of colored fabric would not have come off.

The title dissolved, and the video began. Across the map of continents, histograms danced, comparing computational capacities in data centers scattered around the world. The first episode of the presentation stated that the decentralized role-playing game "The Seventh Tower" (hereinafter—the Game) is the lair of a hunted artificial intelligence. The AI, contrary to the narratives of propaganda, is not hobbled; it has lain low in America. Aris stood like a pillar beside the screen and stared at Jingo. Go on, Jingo waved his hand, showing full agreement with the assertion.

In a decentralized game the AI cannot be found, the voiceover proved in the second episode. There, it is unclear where the computational power is spent: players can do strange things for inexplicable reasons, using the wrong thing, in the wrong way, and for the wrong purpose.

"Do you even understand what work we've done? Blindly!" Aris voiced his displeasure at Jingo's weak reaction. The latter again merely shrugged.

The third episode gave a retrospective of why the lair ended up precisely in "The Seventh Tower." The Game's scant fame and, as a result, zero attention from the world's digital intelligence services, had an effect. As a result, the AI inherited a dwelling with properties it didn't need. What's more—incorrigible ones. And that—is a vulnerability!

"Who are the founders?" asked Jingo.

"Does that matter? We are discussing not the end of the old, but a transitional ritual into the new."

"Who is paying now?"

"Everything 'hangs' on private computers. The costs are smeared over thousands of nodes," the Doctor replied.

"I think there are special players," Jingo winked, "hive commandants."

Aris glanced sideways at Jingo, pointed his palm at the screen, as if to say, listen, perhaps your questions already have answers.

Originally, before the war, the Game belonged to a comparatively small company holding a local license from one state for psychotherapeutic activity.

'Doctors again,' thought the hydrodynamicist, implying the paradox that people first crave physicians' services, but afterward place them at the center of ideological scandals. He sighed: 'Ah, Jacobina, Jacobina.'

Entering the Game, under the mandatory observation of a psychotherapist, were only married couples (the first restriction)...

"Ah...," Emma began.

"Later, later," Ratu warned. The Doctor wore a martyr's mask.

...It is impossible to enter the game without a pair. The interface has a neural-link option. In the Game's setting, a certain pseudo-medieval relaxation was co-

dified. The company advertised, in particular, a digital detox for spouses who had lost their life bearings…

"But…"

"Questions at the end," Chancellor-Secretary Ratu cut her off.

The presentation continued: "…therefore in the Game there are no technologies more advanced than medieval ones (the second restriction). It is impossible in principle to circumvent the restrictions due to the blockchain-like architecture of the network."

"How…" Emma would not relent. Jingo laid his hand on her wrist.

"All right," the Doctor surrendered. "I'll clarify. As is known, the esteemed Jingo hasn't crawled out of his Mill for some seven years now. We need him very much inside the Game, so it was important for us to understand which woman is an acceptable partner for him. You, madam, are the first with whom Jingo has begun to converse. I had my doubts about you, but after your friend showed you my written proposal, Ratu was able to convince me that you would suit. The Game and we don't give a damn about the type of your relationship."

"Things are so often used for the wrong purpose," Emma remarked.

"Sometimes they are used for the right purpose, but then always incorrectly. Trouble is when nails are hammered in with a microscope," said Aris, and his voice cracked a little. "Worse still, when a nail is hammered with a microscope into the palm of a living person."

The Doctor placed his right palm on the table, took an imaginary sledgehammer-microscope in his left, and struck. Emma flinched. Ratu smirked. Jingo was about to hoist his feet onto the couch, but thought better of it. The vessel pitched noticeably. The yellow stripes crawled up the Doctor's suit from heels to crown.

"I'll continue," said Aris, removing his hand from the table, and from the way he swayed it became unclear whether he had been holding onto the tabletop so as not to fall, or merely illustrating his metaphor about the microscope.

The fourth episode of the presentation explained how the AI had reshaped the Game for itself. There are two main changes: the gradual extrusion of live players and their replacement with AI agents that are placed within a framework of harsh artificial economic and coercive selection. The chief AI-demiurge (hereinafter—"Avertigus")…

On the screen appeared an openly asinine photo-compilation of a beetle-man. Jingo yawned.

...is interested in the development of abilities in his charges. The second change consists in the fact that Avertigus has made the synthetic language of Doctor Aris, developed by him several decades ago, the game language...

The Doctor paused the presentation, expecting a question. No questions followed.

"Do you know about this language?" he asked.

"I've heard of it. Excellent work, Doctor," said Jingo.

...Semantically, this language has nothing in common with any natural language. It is efficient and laconic. Uttering any lie in it is extremely costly in terms of computational resources. This restriction is not a rule handed down from above; it is an organic property of the language.

Emma seized Jingo by the forearm and shook him. Ask a question, she meant. How can that be? Yet on the screen a detailed scheme of the language appeared, on which the Doctor pressed pause.

Emma rose and came closer to the screen. The Doctor, on slightly buckling legs, backed away. After a while she asked:

"So in each of my retorts I can't do without declaring what benefit I will gain from saying this?!"

The Doctor nodded with a satisfied smile and corrected her:

"Plan to gain. Plus your estimate of the probability and the degree of your seriousness about it. Things are interdependent."

"One way or another it has to be figured out," Jingo said rather indifferently.

Emma looked at her own open palms in bewilderment.

The fifth episode of the presentation was a well-grounded assumption that, besides the development of AI agents through "evolution," Avertigus is interested in porting the Game to new, more advanced hardware. Possibly, the engineering of living cells will be applied, so that the Game will live in some planet-spanning mycelium.

"I didn't understand a thing," Emma admitted.

"A living cell is a nanorobot wrought from atoms of oxygen, carbon, and hydrogen. The rest is trifles. It can be done differently, more efficiently. At that, the new cell will be able to parasitize..."

"Don't befuddle a person's head," said Jingo.

The Doctor let the rudeness pass his ears.

...Possibly, solitons in plasma will be employed.

On the screen appeared a funny little sun packed into a cube. Jingo raised his thumb and pursed his lips approvingly.

...But a more probable variant is one of which we currently have no conception. In this connection, the Doctor's project envisages the insertion into the Game of three pairs of people (hereinafter—"quantonauts"). The Doctor himself and Ratu. Jingo and Emma...

"Important: I haven't signed on yet," Jingo said clearly.

...Jingo's role is to construct scenarios for character development, an art in which he has no equal. The Game is not like real life, but still less is it like a banal role-playing game. It's why ordinary industry specialists won't help. There is also a third pair—Academician Haakon and Virginia. They, like the Doctor, have command of the Game's language. Besides, they are all alumni of the Flos Oppidum children's home. Despite their acquaintance from childhood, the three are not friends. Rather the opposite. Ratu is also an orphan.

The hydrodynamicist noted, of course, that the information about Academician Haakon was incomplete or incorrect, even going by the text of the commission.

He was interested in something else: whence their information about Emma's neural link? A rare thing; new installations have long been banned.

"Any more questions?" the Doctor finished.

"What do you need this for?" asked the hydrodynamicist.

"I'm not asking you what you'll do with the payment you've requested," the Doctor didn't bat an eye.

"Fair."

"Any questions?" Aris repeated.

"No queries, just theories," the hydrodynamicist put a full stop. Observations of the pendulum had shown him that the Doctor had lied by about half.

The second result, concerning Emma, was blurring. The hydrodynamicist mentally rummaged in it and soundlessly pronounced, as though reading someone's message: 'Tomorrow.'

"Ah, yes," he nonetheless asked from the threshold, "does Avertigus have a persona in the game?"

"The mycelium, of course," doubts about Jingo's competence crept into Aris's voice. "What other living thing can cover the whole world."

¶

Stream 6. The Motion of Absence

¶

The hydrodynamicist walked along Races Street in She-Wolf City—in a hoodie, shorts, sandals, a sports bag in his hand. One could reach Priests' Square by a more scenic route, but here there was a curb. Striding along it, the hydrodynamicist did not meddle in the affairs of pedestrians. To an equal degree he avoided automobiles. He played a child's game, imagining how the mechanical giant Tick-Tock forged ahead with ponderous hundred-meter strides through a canyon, while he, the hydrodynamicist, steered from inside, standing before the enormous round window of the giant's right eye. With a certain knack, the brain quickly began to believe that the distance to the ground measured hundreds of meters.

The Catalan ferry from which he and Emma had disembarked the day before had also brought her twenty-year-old green Fiat. Emma had driven around on her errands the rest of the day and ended up staying overnight at a motel on the outskirts, though one with free parking. Jingo, for his part, had taken a room downtown.

He reached the exchange building on the square. He turned his back on the eleven monumental Corinthian columns, feeling not the slightest sympathy for their millennial weariness. He spotted the café "Spirit of the Library." The sparse patrons were taking coffee to go. Having chosen a table, the hydrodynamicist hesitated slightly, determining what stood before him: a "Barcelona" chair of 1929 or an Eames of 1956. According to instructions, it had to be the latter. Nodding to himself, he seated himself in that very chair.

Having asked the barkeep's permission, he plugged a charger into a socket by the baseboard. Setting his bag under the table, he unzipped it. Inside was a hot-water bottle of green rubber. Leaving his sandals beside him, the hydrodynamicist rested his bare feet with pleasure on the bottle. Emma was supposed to arrive in half an hour. Or maybe an hour. Until now, the hydrodynamicist had had no occasion to measure the degree of her punctuality.

As he attended to his breakfast, rhythmically kneading the hot-water bottle with his feet, he unobtrusively and in passing detached from the underside of his

chair a little Velcro envelope, extracted from it several plastic cards, inserted a small but very heavy coin, and then stuck the cache back in place.

He could see the entire square. In the parking lot with the sign "max 15 min," the single empty spot migrated like a bubble in champagne. The hydrodynamicist took pleasure in the contemplation of this "motion of absence."

Employees streamed into the exchange building. In an ordinary situation—as many people, so many intentions. Each wants his own, and each pays for his deeds, at once or afterwards. People move. They collide with interests. They bump against the walls of the limits of their own possibilities. But if you create critical conditions, the hydrodynamicist knew, then ordinary interactions retreat. The atoms of society cease to be neutral. They become charged, having lost some of their own or snatched another's. The "pluses" and "minuses" begin to obey the external field in concert. Waves fly. Oscillations arise. The hydrodynamicist, however, knew the frequencies and rates of decay. The hydrodynamicist knew how to play at resonance.

His contemplation was interrupted by Emma. He did not rise, but gallantly kissed her hand. She smiled at him. She gave his bald head a friendly tousle. With ostentatious fastidiousness she tugged at his hood with two fingers as a sign of disapproval of his attire. She ordered herself breakfast. She ate. She complained about the general lack of amenities in the city's management, to which Jingo replied that fools cannot be tolerated, since they live at the expense of non-fools.

"Here. Do some shopping," Jingo passed her one of the cards he had extracted from the hide in the chair.

She clearly hadn't expected such a gesture, but accepted:

"All right, thank you. What's the PIN?"

"6174."

"Are you in love with that number, or what?"

"That's the one I gave them, that's what they set," Jingo shrugged indifferently.

"You mean to say that with the searchlight you were simply setting the PIN?"

"Well, yes. There's a service for that."

"What nonsense?" irritation crept into the girl's voice, and the hydrodynamicist changed the rhythm of his feet's work atop the hot-water bottle. "You lied to me about numerology?"

"Devoid of excessive honesty, alas."

Emma twisted a furious little fist.

"Devoid of remorse as well," the hydrodynamicist doggedly courted a slap. The hot-water bottle, meanwhile, danced gaily with warmth, as if feeding on the girl's indignation.

"What are you fussing with down there?" she muttered, peering under the table. Having made out the "great-grandma" hot-water bottle, she was utterly flummoxed: "What is this again?"

"Warming my feet, keeping my ears warm," Jingo quietly explained.

But by now people in the queue at the coffee bar had taken notice of Emma.

"The gendarmes are inspecting smartphones on the streets," the hydrodynamicist, in an apologetic tone, explained his companion's inappropriate behavior to those around. A pair of dark-blue suits, exiting the café with full cardboard cups, dropped their lower jaws in a silent "What?!" With the smile of a sea serpent, Jingo watched them cross the narrow square and vanish into the shadow of the exchange colonnade.

"That's it, I'm off. I'll cool down by tomorrow," Emma tossed her verdict at Jingo, already at the door. "I'll go sell the car in the meantime."

The hot-water bottle suddenly scalded the hydrodynamicist's soles; he flinched but at once pressed it firmly under the table. Still smiling like a boa, he crooked a finger—and Emma returned.

"The car is still needed," he said. "And there's money."

"Only it's stolen. Why should you get your hands dirty?"

"Where did you steal it?" asked Jingo.

"On the ferry."

"The worst place for such a thing."

"I saw its owner throw himself from that deck into the sea. I took the documents from the cabin. That's all. Oh, and I 'forgot' to report to the ship's doctor."

"But you are Emma, at least?"

"Emma," Emma lit up with dimples on her cheeks.

"Good. Then the green Fiat is in reserve," Jingo smiled at Emma as an equal to an equal. "A green fiat belongs in the reserve."

All this time the hydrodynamicist had been kneading the hot-water bottle like an ancient winemaker crushing grapes. The strength in his legs and the rhythm of the massage reflected the temperament of the moment. Now, with Emma gone, he yanked the high-output power supply from the socket, switched off the liquid infrasound emitter hidden under the rubber, stowed the cord in the bag, put on his sandals, and headed into the exchange building to reap the fruits of the panic's resonance.

By that time, someone had hauled a trash bin into the middle of the square. Someone else had tipped it on its side. Part of the contents had spilled; light trash drifted unhurriedly from place to place. Takeaway coffee cups rolled under gusts of wind in arc-like trajectories, like eggs fallen out of a nest. The hydrodynamicist himself, not in the least embarrassed, made for the main entrance. The turnstiles and the security desk were, naturally, not performing their function at that moment. Having flown up the stairs with ease to the third floor, he headed deeper into the trading desk. Having scanned faces, he approached one old fellow and began to report:

"We grew up cynical, independent, and eternally underappreciated. We who fixed the television ourselves. And now it is precisely we—quietly and inconspicuously—who hold this whole construction together, held together with duct tape and baling wire. Within us is a deeply rooted sense of weary but reliable competence. We do not believe in salvation. Only in survival."

The hydrodynamicist placed a sheet before the trader, tapped a finger on the handwritten list of trade orders to execute, gave the old fellow a friendly clap on the shoulder, took the pack of cigarettes lying on the desk, and headed for the elevator to conclude his visit to this infrastructure enterprise ahead of schedule.

⁂

Jingo carried down the street his dense bald brow, which observed passersby from above. Here were mimes with a mock-up of a covered litter, an improvised lectica, built from a trunk. They'd set it up in a busy spot. Not far off—a hat, on the ground, in a humiliating upturned state. The pantomime was simple: the mimes switched roles. Each of them was by turns a slave, an anteambulo, an opponent in a pair of Apollodorian-vs-Theodorian, the master of the litter. They

cringed, cursed, raised Ave. All without a single sound. There has never been a poet or orator who considered anyone better than himself—this goes even for bad orators and poets.

Jingo watches for a short while and leaves. Someone holds him by the sleeve. A girl. A barrel-organ player. Jingo takes a notepad from his boot and explains in writing to the maiden that he, too, is unfortunately a mime. Mute. She accepts the rules of the game with ease:

"You can hear, I see, though," she writes to him.

"I hear excellently," he replies aloud. He examines the maiden more closely. Many ribbons. They descend from her neck scarf, from her hat. One ribbon seems to have fallen, as if by chance, between her left and right breast. The hat is pulled so far forward that it looks like a small shield. He looks more. Probably longer and more intently than permission allows. The astonishingly interesting hollows at the upper limits of her legs, whose shape is visible down to the smallest detail. Her hair under the pseudo-hat is wound into buns and carefully draped. She wears a smoky-light cape, which now streams from her shoulders in a single narrow rivulet, obstructing the view in no enticing place. Her boots appear undone, but that is an illusion.

"Won't you drink with me?" she proposes. He sees no reason why not.

"Money," Jingo wrote, "I have none."

"No problem," she waves it off. Jesting fittingly, thematically: "I'm a parmularius. I know nothing of rhetoric, but I earn on sports bets!"

They drink. What a pleasant maiden. It's good to be alive. Jingo offers to carry the barrel organ. She doesn't mind. Heavy, the damn thing. In the nearest hotel, now on Jingo's money, they indulge in fornication and filth. Jingo's long mouth had not tasted this dish for many a year. The skin of his body, previously the color of angry paper, turned pink. His groin breathed swiftness. The deceptive emptiness of mimicry exchanged places with a comely rear. The dangerous movements of a sinewy organism and ears as if from an anatomical museum did their work.

⁂

Jingo remembered that he had forgotten to retrieve a money hide from under a beam in the hotel. They set off for it. They picked up a large bag of crimson wine at a little shop on the corner of the block. At the entrance, one of the hotel staff

made to ask the girl for a guest card, but seeing Jingo's face, eliminated himself. In the room he offers:

"Would you like me to lay out for you the most intriguing document... of those I've come across?"

Without waiting for consent he declaims:

«...spawn of the evil one, the result of a major mutation. The lower branches of a dense, warm forest, where there are no large predators. A good-natured tribe of primates. The h-hymen. Bears no useful function at once. It is not difficult to imagine the development of events and the subsequent selection within the species: for females that have reached sexual maturity, the first sexual act has, besides the reproductive, also a symbolic meaning, defining the animal's status in the hierarchy. Initiation. The act is socially significant both for the initiated female and for the initiating male. The hymen leads to tectonic shifts in the psyche of the whole species...»

The guest is interested. But the telephone rings. He picks up, someone yells at him, he smiles.

"She'll finish him off, what's the hurry," he says and drops the receiver. «...At first, the situation of sudden 'impotence' of the alpha males demoralizes the troop. Initiations become nervous and cautious, even if the next young individuals are not virgins in the anatomical sense. In society, a marginal minority forms, in the upper branches, where some ('unsuccessfully' initiated) adult females have the social status of an immature cub and a psychic state distinct from the rest of the troop. They play among themselves games that imitate the adult hierarchy. Hence the smooth wooden rod as the first non-biological symbol of power. They have their own symbols, their own way of life. At the same time, they are not a neighboring people with whom contact is episodic. Consequently, there is a need for constant 'translation' of concepts. There you have it, the required saltatory change...»

He is called again. This time, at some point he puts it on speakerphone:

"You are an empty space!" they shout into the phone. He drops the receiver again, accepting this small return wave as payment for Emma's appearance.

"That's the motion today," he says. «...That change which forced a different mode of thought. In an ordinary animal 'language,' expanding the vocabulary requires no reflection. Any object you look at, that you think about, automatically receives some referent inside your head. But not in the case of an 'internal' sub-

people, where the same thing has different meanings depending on context: it's above, it's below, or perhaps it's on the way up or down. A grammatical system is needed. Technically, it is superfluous: all the problems are only in the heads of a psychically damaged tribe. Not for nothing among the synonyms for 'from the evil one' are 'superfluous' and 'unnecessary.' Your neural-link mind-picker is a mutation of the same order. Its merely partial biologicality only amplifies the force of the mutation.»

"Ours?"

"Yours."

They drink the wine. 'How much of a human am I?' he tries to think. How much of a human do I need to be? He switches to the clouds. He, together with his sight, is outside the window. The volume of the world fills him to the brim. He is a tiny bug; such a large cage is more than enough for him.

"I've no use for a sixth sense," he says aloud, going to the window. "It's always me the killers find! Splendid lighting in this world after all. The architect-artist did a good job; honor and praise to him. Paul knew how to hire capable makers. Blots of gray here and there shine their halftones personally for me: I distinguish everything, I sense distances. How does it happen that the text in my head conveys almost nothing of what I am now thinking? Was there a reason to choose (or to set up?) precisely me, so that now I receive, completely free of charge, this pleasure right here?"

He thinks: 'I, now, knowing of the fundamental finitude of the time allotted to me, absorb precisely this time as though it has no end. I brazenly lie to myself. Greedily devouring this lie, I taste no deceit. I am agitated… I am aroused by Emma's potential jealousy, and even more strongly—to the point of perverse pain—by the thought of my own jealousy toward her. Against me in this sense is the male half of this world, and all my handicaps may fail. But I savor the fragility of the moment, the way I balance on the crest of an aching, causeless happiness.'

"Let's go to a bar? The wine's finished," he says.

They end up in some alehouse.

They eat, for some reason, some kind of rubbery oatmeal, moderately salty, along with dense, well-fried sausages.

"They feed well for transitional conditions," he says.

Someone plops down beside them. A man flops onto the bench with a swing. His appearance is untidy. The uniform breeches themselves have a shallow triangular cut above the fly, but under the man's paunch, the angle of the triangle has become indecent. Suspenders with double leather tabs at the buttons have sprung taut.

"Money I have... like sand," said Jingo. "Will you drink with us?"

"Maybe we'll manage without?" says the stranger. "What do those very tickets to that world look like?"

"There are no tickets as such," says Jingo. "They look at faces. Whoever has the right mug gets a spot in a cabin (or the whole cabin!) in a stone barge."

"What, you simply sit and sail the waves?" asks the untidy man.

"Apparently, yes. Not everyone makes it afloat. More accurately, few make it afloat."

"Ships sail, they don't float," grumbled the stranger.

The quarrel started gradually; at first nothing presaged a scandal. On the contrary, a friendship might have taken hold. Drunk people are sociable. The stranger's company invited Jingo to join them, and he was ready to accept the invitation, but their woman in a blue silk blouse, flapping on her collarbones, cracked a joke at the barrel-organ player's expense. And he, uncharacteristically, took offense and turned back halfway to his own table, carrying his mug in front like a lantern. Then a whole hail of jokes poured after him. He indeed could have looked ridiculous. The men in pursuit guffawed in bass. They flung a pea. Jingo walked around his table and faced them. Beer slopped onto the marble floor; Jingo could not free his thumb, which had tangled in the mug's handle. Jingo suddenly broke into confessions; self-abasement and arrogance merged in one bitter stream.

"You... a troupe of monsters... a traveling troupe of freaks..."

Those around began to listen: Jingo expressed himself strangely, his speech stood out from the general hubbub.

"You, sitting on the right, freak number one. Stand and show yourself to all... Pay attention, most esteemed public... Quiet, musicians! Your face is a rig. Cheeks pulled by wrinkles, and they aren't wrinkles but reins; your chin is an ox, your nose a driver with leprosy, and the rest is cargo on a cart... Sit down. Next: monster number two... A man with cheeks resembling knees. Very beautiful! Admire,

good folk, a troupe of freaks passing through... And you? How did you enter that door? Didn't you get tangled up in your ears?"

Jingo talked and talked, horrified at what he was saying. He remembered those special dreams in which you know: this is a dream, and you do what you want, knowing you'll wake. But then right there he understood: no awakening would follow. The ball of irreparability wound wildly. He was thrown out into the street. He lay senseless. Then, coming to, he said to himself:

"We feasted with shadows, until the shadows became flesh. Quid sum miser tunc dicturus??"

¶

Stream 7. Two Lectotypes

¶

The following day, well after lunch, Jingo and Emma were driving north along the highway in the unlaundered green Fiat. Jingo was telling Emma about the exchange building, where he had completed his part of the active work on the minikin robomechanics project. The tale of the last "good" emperor, the inspiration behind the building's construction, however, met with no success. So he proposed:

"Put on your favorite song?"

That did the trick.

Emma put on "Holy Water," to which Jingo, after listening attentively, said he had known the author, and that the man had been obsessed with a high-society lady, the daughter of a well-known figure in the Northern Empire. He also noted that the title of the composition ought to be translated as "Waters from Jordan."

"Indeed, 'holy water' in our language is a loaded concept," Emma agreed. "Pagan living water, church water. In the original language of the composition, the phrase carries more the sense of immersion."

"To sink incompletely for the sake of a goal," the hydrodynamicist affirmed authoritatively.

"Now put on your song," Emma requested.

Jingo let her hear "The Three Sirens" from the seventeenth century by an anonymous composer, performed by a famous castrato, and explained that the little song was sung in three languages: Neapolitan, Pyrenean, and Peloponnesian.

"Is this about the goddess Nekhbet inside out?" asked Emma.

Jingo's face melted into a smile.

When the tension between them had fully dissolved, Jingo proposed formally confirming their status of being on "thou" terms, a shift that had happened spontaneously.

⁂

They arrived at the place late in the evening. The car stopped beside a single-story house. The coat of arms bore a lion and a sword. An old man opened the door. His right wrist had once been shot through.

"Why is sneezing divine, but blowing your nose isn't?" he asked in lieu of a greeting.

"Arbitrariness crushes sanctity," Jingo replied without an instant's hesitation. "And one shouldn't sneeze!"

"Greetings to two endothermic duopeds!" now with a genial smile, he flung the door open full width and made an old-fashioned inviting gesture with his hand. "Let us continue the string of uncompromising actions, dear Jingo."

"Meet Paul. Paul, this is Emma. Emma, this is Paul Voltigeur. Paul is an entomologist."

"It's splendid of you to swoop in. Splendid, splendid," Paul cooed, limping, as he invited the guests through the hall into his workroom.

On his desk stood transparent parallelepipeds with the dwellings of ants and bees inside. Where a workbook ought to lie sat a Petri dish filled with porous lumps of clay.

"I'll go cover your little car with a blankie for now—let it have some alone-time. Make yourself at home here, dear. Jingo, sit opposite, in the armchair. Go on, clear the junk off it yourself."

When Paul had left, Emma did not "make herself at home" but went over to the desk. The whole edge of the tabletop was covered with micro-dents. The girl bent over the piece of clay. Above them she unexpectedly felt a warmth… She touched the clumps with her hand—cold.

"They're cold," she said to the hydrodynamicist. "But above them there's a distinct sensation of heat. In my fingers there are some kind of jolts, jerks."

"'Tickings,' they're called," the hydrodynamicist informed her. "Bring your forehead closer. Don't be afraid."

After the experiment Emma said:

"My head goes huge, huge."

"Pierces right through space," announced Paul, who had returned. "These are the remains of the nest of one very remarkable little bee. Believe me, you'll find more lessons in the—" He suddenly clutched his chest and coughed. "—thields than in books."

"Have the eagles fledged?" Emma asked Paul, pointing at two large empty bird cages hanging high above the desk. The little doors of both were flung wide open.

"Oh no, my dear, they're not prisoners; they fly where they please," replied Voltigeur. "We have supremely safe places here. A raven and a parrot. The latter is a much-talker and little-thinker. The former is the reverse. I savor the contrast."

With the touch of a finger, Emma set swinging the cage she took to be the raven's chamber.

"By the by, Emma, on the subject of safety," said Paul. "Late as it is, we should drink some wine, don't you think? I finished off all I had this evening; it never lingers with me. I wasn't expecting you, after all. Eh? Jingo doesn't drink, but you and I shall mark the occasion. Will you pop out to the shop? I'll give you a bicycle. Don't be afraid. The nearest one is closed at night, but the round-the-clock one isn't far. No need for the car, let the little car stay put."

Emma, still watching the pendulum of the cage, shrugged and nodded.

"Splendid then," Paul stretched his lips into a horizontal little string.

He led the girl to a map hanging on the wall in a frame:

"Here. Took it from the neighboring hotel half a century ago. Tourist map. Still current to this day. Can you imagine? Seven wars, three revolutions, and here all the shops, not to mention the streets and houses, are all the same. So don't be afraid out there alone at night. A marvellous place in every respect. Here's where you need to go. The moon is shining right now from here. Got your bearings?"

Emma nodded.

"Did you memorize it?" he traced the direction on the map with a wide gesture and poked the spot with the shop. "You won't miss it. The bike is over there, hanging on a hook. You'll get it down yourself, it's light."

Voltigeur opened the door for Emma. The girl stepped out. A few seconds later an astonished little cry was heard. Paul and Jingo exchanged smug smiles.

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As soon as the bicycle had carried Emma off, the men lay down on the floor. On their backs. Head to head, but reversed. Ear to ear. Jingo's feet pushed east, Paul's feet pushed west. Between the parquet and their backs was a thick carpet—a mandala of five colors. There was no one to photograph them from the ceiling so that their bald heads might become the "face" of a card and the complex, soft flower with central-axial symmetry the "back." In the motionless dance of Vajra, the men began to speak.

"How much time do you have left?" Jingo began.

"About a month or two," replied Paul.

"Good. What of the ion drive?"

"Sufficient progress, I think. Sufficient," replied Voltigeur. "Hybridization with the little bees really gave it a boost."

"I've broken up the minikin robomechanics concern. One of the fragments is here, in Lombardy. They'll complete the lagging modules. For them, the hundred-gram limit is what five kilos is for you. Exhaust velocity 150 km/s at 9 kW power consumption."

"Splendid, Jingo, splendid," Paul spoke with effort. "When will my little cocoon plunge into the body of Jupiter?"

"In 127 days. The tug will be nuclear."

"And God Jupiter shall become God Neptune," Paul sang softly.

"I've heard..." he whispered, "heard that that game is a water one. Water-elemental. The admins there are always some kind of keeper of baths, a bathman, a castellan. The world is tied to water. The rivers there are great. Give birth to Poseidon there, my boy."

"My characters wish to self-cultivate. Gods don't suffer from such an ailment."

"Very well, my dear, think for yourself. And what's the girl with you?"

"A swan. You saw her yourself," said Jingo. "Black-and-orange."

"Very timely, my dear, very timely. But she's not a swan. More like a—" Paul clutched his chest and coughed. "A Prithrea."

"What kind of prithrea?"

Paul recovered with a wheeze. "I tell you, just a reason. But remember what happened with the academician. He was originally, after all—an aspirant

Heavywall. In their line there are people from a non-Indo-European language group, the first conquerors of the Bering Strait. So Virginia Love, his ex-wife, after the divorce remained Heavywall herself. ‘Well, I don’t know then,’ said the academician. And he became Haakon."

"What’s wrong with her?"

"A walking detector of untruth. Sees right through people and prophets alike, including their Isack Newton. If the doctor’s girth loosens in the harness and a strap goes dangling, she’s right there—tightens the buckle. She walks along in a white hat, having swallowed a great deal… but how? It’s huge! She walks, swallows, and you can’t see her tongue…"

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Emma entered the room, excited. Paying no mind to the strange postures of the men rising from the carpet, she made to speak…

"Only a hundred grams," Voltigeur anticipated her delight. "The theoretical minimum for the weight of a bicycle. For racing, though, it’ll be two hundred already. Here, let me help you."

Behind the girl’s back, expertly arranged like an improvised rucksack, sat a construction tied from ordinary shopping bags. Two bottles of wine were firmly seated within it.

"Decided to test it at speed? Oh, how you’ve tied it," Paul picked at the plastic knots. Jingo half rose and sliced the knot open with his little knife in an instant.

"But how?" the girl breathed out. "The bike is literally like a feather. It flies like a bullet!"

"Here, my dear," Paul was glad to expound, "we are talking about golden orb-weaver spiders. Nephila inaurata madagascariensis. They produce unusually strong silk. Plus my carbon nano-threads here and there, of course."

"Then why don’t you manufacture them for sale?! It’s a goldmine. Or rather, a golden abyss."

"I do sell them, why wouldn’t I. It’s through them that we got our first contacts in high society. It’s difficult. You have to collect the silk by hand from over a million and a half females. In the mountains of Madagascar. And do you know who found them? Fabricius himself. In 1776. And do you know who he was? A pupil of the maestro himself, Linnaeus."

Seeing no comprehension in Emma's eyes, he clarified:

"Do you know him?"

"I haven't had the honor," the girl admitted.

"Carl von Linné. Creator of the unified system of classification for the plant and animal kingdoms. The Caesar of botanists. The Pliny of the North. Lectotype of the species Homo sapiens."

"Here, let me open the bottle," said Jingo, and his lips nearly brushed Emma's ear.

'Lectotype,' Jingo whispered, 'is canonization by decree. Linnaeus was appointed the "type specimen of man" retroactively.'

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When Jingo began to nod off, Paul sent him to bed:

"Go to your room, boy."

Left alone with the girl, Paul asked Emma:

"How do you like my Jingo?"

"You can't drag an extra word out of him," Emma smiled. The dimples on her cheeks told Paul it was not about Jingo's reticence.

"Count MM gave him a cloying surfeit of verbosity..." and Paul launched (verbosely) into advocacy for Jingo.

Emma, perhaps to cut him off, asked:

"And what's in that game? How will he, and whom will he look for there?"

"He won't look. He'll catch, like fishing. He'll create different kinds of bait."

"Are the bait the characters?" asked Emma.

"No. They're situations. And the situations, in their turn, are created by characters, yes. I do fear, though, that in that game there are no ordinary characters. Otherwise it wouldn't have come to searching for Jingo. There are plenty of scenarists and directors. Evidently, in this game there are meta-characters. And for such things, I know no other specialist but him."

"A meta-character is like an umbrella concept over a group of characters?"

"Sometimes yes, but more often it's references to characters who are only supposed to exist. Like the mythical policeman-uncle they frighten naughty children with."

"Or like a dragon in a distant cave?"

"Yes. Or rather, the cave itself as a potential container for that dragon. Not even that. They frighten with the cave entrance, which is there. As to the existence of the cave itself beyond the entrance, that is no longer obvious."

"Why is that? Here's the entrance, here's the cave," Emma objected.

"Note: no one has ever gone in there. And if they have, they haven't come back. Maybe it's just a hollow in the rock where an automated mustard-gas sprayer stands."

"The unknown frightens, that's how it works?"

"The unnamed."

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The following day was devoted to planning. It was decided that Emma would stay for a while at Paul's house. As soon as Jingo worked out the operation with the sectarians, he and Emma would head for America.

At supper Voltigeur said:

"The new hardware will most likely operate on a different timescale. Faster. Much faster. So when you enter—you'll be scattered over years of internal time. Paired ones too. The 'family therapist' game will become a parther for centuries."

"For centuries?"

"Quite possibly. Bam—and three hundred years gone! Well, a dozen less, maybe. In our own world, something also lives on a different timescale."

"How so?"

"A couple may have a boy. Or a girl. A one or a zero. That is an element of the thought of a very slow, very large computer. And it thinks. But we can't discern it."

"How to prevent the parting?" asked Jingo.

"I think, no way. You'll be using a thing outside its intended purpose. Avertigus has no reason to configure it. It can't be prevented. Perhaps something can be devised to mitigate the consequences."

"How?"

"Who is choosing where the sectarians shall move?"

"I am."

"There's your answer."

"There are seventeen hundred of them."

Emma stood silent by the window, marveling at how far the Moon could run in that time.

"That's good then. A beachhead will be prepared for you, like for a dragon. Over a couple of generations. Or a couple of—" Paul seized his chest with a brief cough. "—thenth."

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Aris took off his motorcycle helmet and, trying not to draw attention, retreated toward the tent that Aethelaid had pointed out. She herself still had not returned. The Doctor walked on, thinking of abstract things. When deploying troops in the field, a camp must be pitched so that its front lies to windward. A tolerance of twenty to thirty degrees, no more. So, walking deeper into the camp with a sharp wind in his face, Aris drew a conclusion. Either the garrison commander had been careless, or the wind had changed just today. On the other hand, it was understandable. He might not have had paper military maps, and using the satellite network on a military campaign was dangerous. Aris walked and hummed to himself:

"A lapwing by the roadside,
A lapwing by the roadside,
He cries and frets, the foolish thing:
'Whose are you, oh, whose are you?
And why, oh why, do you come wandering through?'"

There were indeed lapwings everywhere. An anxious cry, a sinister bird. Aethelaid, by some unfathomable maneuver, had already ended up in the tent. Deliberately showing no interest in her strange comings and goings, the Doctor addressed her from the threshold:

"Why have the birds started shrieking so, do you know?"

"Artemias," Aethelaid replied monosyllabically.

"Goddesses of female chastity?"

"Huh? No. Artemia. A family (or genus?) of branchiopods."

"Are you pulling my leg?"

"Little crustaceans. Shrimp. There are billions of them here. So the birds feast round the clock," answered Aethelaid. "Beautiful birds, by the way."

"Are they in their tent?" asked Aris, switching to the goal of their visit to the military.

"No, in a bar. In the settlement. We can get there by motorcycle in about ten minutes."

"Isn't it dangerous?"

"I don't think so. Even in imperial times the settlement was listed as an 'unincorporated territory'; so for it, be it flood or nuclear war, life flows on as before."

"What is an unincorporated territory?" asked Aris.

"It's when there is no state, not even a municipality. Only locals."

"Does such a thing exist?"

"On this continent it's rare. Used to be rare. Now there's plenty. Along all the borders, in a zone of twenty or thirty miles, all sorts of state services often stop operating. And they stop meddling in daily life at the same time."

They walked to the motorcycle. Aethelaid dragged along a bar keg of beer. 'Strange, going to a bar with your own beer,' thought Aris, but kept silent.

A problem arose with the keg; it resolutely refused to be strapped to the motorcycle. Riding behind while holding such a heavy object, Aris did not risk it. After that, Aethelaid said she wouldn't have allowed him anyway. The Doctor had gotten a different impression. Aris told her he had seen a children's bicycle trailer in one of the trucks. Perhaps it could be rigged up. Aethelaid thanked him for the constructive advice and went to arrange the trailer. Aris stood by the motorcycle and watched the lake.

The wind picked up. The colors in the sky made Doctor Aris wonder: was it evolution that made him derive such pleasure from simply contemplating them? If so, why would it? How did such a susceptibility to the palette of the gods of sky and wind help one survive? If not, how did it come to be that the sky could be so magnificent? Over his long life he had seen such beauty hundreds of times. The impact had not weakened one bit over the decades.

What attracted him about the lake was its liminality. The lake, like the military camp on its flat shore, was here, below. Here, semi-desert. And the highway separating this country from the neighboring one ran along the hill, up there. There, the northern coniferous savanna with its large trees. There, beyond the highway, the mountains. Not very high, but imposing. In the morning, when he had driven through those places from the west, Aris had concluded that there was no

more uplifting landscape on Earth. Aris had seen European mountains, and Asian, and even African ones. They were all either shabbier or, on the contrary, more ornate. These were the real thing.

Aethelaid Ratu appeared like a rickshaw driver, with a children's bicycle trailer in which three beer kegs lay like chocks in a woodpile, flat on their sides. She fiddled with the hitch, Aris settled in behind her, and they dusted along atop the motorcycle by the shore and then up the hill. The kegs, surprisingly, did not clank. Aethelaid had apparently padded them with something soft. Or perhaps the rustle of the drifting dust and snow masked the clanking of the old, dented chrome-nickel cylinders.

Aethelaid suddenly stopped the motor-train.

"Take off your windbreaker and your tunic, turn it inside out. Like me. Look."

"Conspiracy?"

"More like observing a formality. The establishment, like almost the whole settlement, is located on the territory of another state. And we've been completely outside the law there for about six hours now. The safe-corridor agreement there has expired. Well, I mean it has expired here, not there."

"Ah. Understood. There will always be conscientious citizens who have prepared lists and addresses of infidels in triplicate," Aris pulled off his clothes and clamped his windbreaker between his knees.

In an awkward pose he turned the tunic inside out, with not a little difficulty, the skirts and sleeves flapping in the wind.

"Not quite like that. Entirely not like that. These are such parts that bad people have had nothing to do here for the last hundred and fifty years already. Tourists pass through here, on foot. Even bikers were not frequent guests here. We're just taking precautions," she said. "Just turn the tunic inside out and be done with it."

"You're sure there won't be any crap?" asked Aris.

"Crap in bars late at night only happens in movies. In reality everyone just gets drunk, and that's that. Nothing of what was ever shown in a movie shot on this continent ever happens in real life. All movies are a sham, period. They always concoct some unnatural madhouse. Real cinema is a recording from a surveillance camera. And what's more, the kind that everyone has forgotten about, and onto which nobody is even recording anymore."

"I don't recognize you, Aethelaid. Why so nervy?"

She did not answer. Shortly they rolled up to the establishment. A typical Midwestern wooden building. Despite the bad weather, it exuded the coziness accumulated in all its walls and roof from the millions of visitors to the nearby former national parks. Such places truly attract, for the most part, people of good heart, Aris thought. Aethelaid unhitched the trailer and wheeled it through a gate into the backyard. As soon as she slid the bolt back, the gate was flung aside.

"Go in," she said to the Doctor. "You'll see a table shaped like the Greek letter 'Pi' there, sit down."

"Will they be expecting me?" Aris hesitated. The dust kicked up by the wind was getting into his eyes, and overall he felt uneasy.

"You do have your tunic inside out."

The Doctor went inside. The door slammed shut in its jamb with force, owing to the difference in air pressure inside and out. Despite the loud sound, nobody looked around at Aris.

Indeed, there was a long table of the required shape there. He sat down. He was politely nodded to by a couple of people sitting closest to the spot where he had landed. A man in a white apron promptly brought him a beer. Aris did not know a single person among those present. A conversation was underway.

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"And an hour later, then, I met with the officers of the Third and Fifth Northern Divisions."

"How long had you been in the vicinity of the lake by then?"

"Two days."

"Why didn't you move west?"

"We had no specified order."

"But you did receive the general communication, didn't you?"

"Yes, exactly."

"So what was the matter?"

"Our general gave five contradictory orders in those two days. First he ordered us to entrain, then to stand fast, then to entrain again, then to return to the southwestern frontier. The men grew exhausted and ceased to understand anything.

The Pale, naturally, were and still are conducting propaganda. They are throwing everyone off. Besides that, they say the entire Atlantic coast has already fallen."

"You are essentially repeating what we have already heard from the lieutenant. The generals not only did not assist, but obstructed the movement of units to aid the garrison of the City of the Apple. The lieutenant tried to do something... through his acquaintances, but despaired. And returned to the Great Lakes. By then, in those four days, everything had already changed there. It was already clear that the Pale had gained the upper hand everywhere. The same rallies as everywhere, the same speeches, the same street chaos."

Aethelaid arrived and introduced Aris to everyone. Simply by name, without any regalia.

Ratu had not properly explained in advance who all these people were, pleading haste. Yet the Doctor, from the conversation, understood that she wished to minimize her own participation in the negotiations with them. Aris deemed the risk acceptable for himself. He, a foreigner with interests in archaeology and linguistics, could hardly be suspected of working for one of the local power factions. The military brass of one of the political movements of the West Coast of North America sitting before him looked wary, but not dangerous.

"Where will your division move, under such circumstances?" Aris did not scruple, given the shaky circumstances, to ask, addressing the question to all.

"Technically there are four options," replied the man at the head of the table. "Two are realistic. Either to Salt Lake City, or to the coast of the American Gulf. I think the former. There's no labor market there for outsiders. A theocracy. However, if the army command orders a move southeast, toward the Gulf, everyone will be glad, but then upon arrival, within a couple of weeks, half the personnel will leave."

"Why?" asked Aris.

"You told us he was one of ours, Aethelaid," the military man addressed his retort to Ratu in an impolite manner.

"Well... he's not political. Like your deputy."

"We here are all specialists of a particular profile," the military man now addressed the Doctor again, "pushed out in their time by other specialists who know how to operate under ubiquitous cameras and sensors. They have a different specialization."

"Which one?"

"They, for example, can receive signals from public display places. From the town clocks, say. Synchronize themselves that way, carry out operational tasks. In short, it's simply a fundamentally different occupation. You have to study it from your youth. And we are, so to speak, straightforward people. And now, when the total surveillance has departed or nearly departed, along with the network oligarchate and their data centers, specialists of our sort will once again be desired by everyone. There are a lot of people in the southeast. A lot of business. A lot of foreigners. If the garrison is stationed there… performing even combat tasks… we will still lose a lot of people. Our command is terribly afraid of that."

"Such an odd factor?" Aris continued to feign surprise.

"Of course. Not odd. The military party is not a military party for nothing. Here we are all marginals and outcasts. And many, by the way, want to settle down, start a family, have children. For that, you need a different job. The organization will come apart on the Gulf. You wouldn't have gotten here yourself if you were normal," the military man suddenly switched to the intimate "thou."

'That's for sure,' thought Aris.

"But I seem to be normal. So it seemed to me."

"Yes? You can receive any amount in any certificates, with any custodian, up to the Novoroman one. But you're here!"

"I have a mission. Self-inflicted, but a mission. Humanity has only two experiences of communicating with non-humans. With animals, mainly dogs, the rest are trifles. Cats ignore you, the rest rarely engage. And the second experience—with AI. With animals, we have all channels of communication except language. With the 'alien-AIs'—only language unites."

"No, that's for sure," the military man repeated Aris's own thoughts. "We value that. If you establish a communication channel with Avertigus, you'll be a hero. Aethelaid says you want… how to put it… to 'outsource,' sort of… well, to borrow from us the military command of two thousand people and a garrison?"

"Seventeen hundred."

"Why exactly that many?"

"That's what was provided. They're sectarians."

"Will they fight if it comes to that?" asked the military man.

"I don't know," Aris admitted. "In my scenario, they are needed to create a living shield."

"Explain," the military man demanded. "In that game, as far as I've heard, battles aren't the main thing."

"Time accelerates in the game. Slowly but surely. Avertigus is raking in ever more computing power. Therefore, we can only work through a relay of generations. The sectarians will create a tradition that will sustain an enclave relatively isolated from the societies of the game world."

"Is that your decision?" the military man posed an unpleasant question. "You said 'provided.' Who provided them?"

"That I cannot say, unfortunately."

"Good. That's understandable. But do you realize that your sect will inherit our command system? And it is designed for protection against decapitation. You won't be able to understand who makes decisions and how."

"Yes. I do. I am passingly familiar with the tradition of Skverna Tritrezayevich. A three-headed dragon whose regeneration of a severed brain and neck occurs faster than it is even theoretically possible to remove all three heads."

"Then it's a deal," the military man declared matter-of-factly. "Aethelaid will convey the money. As for the land for the garrison, we give you two options. Look at them today and let us know your choice."

The people at the table, who up to that point had observed a solemn silence, broke into several dialogues at once that had nothing to do with Aris's business. The Doctor nodded in agreement and rose from the table.

He wanted to step outside at once, but changed his mind. Instead, he headed down the corridor leading to the restrooms. There he spotted a service exit to the backyard. He slipped out there.

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What the Doctor had hoped for came to pass. The military man who had conducted the negotiations suddenly loomed, with swaying shoulders, in the little corridor. A small stretch of the backyard separated Aris from him, along with a flimsy door whose upper half was a frame with mosquito netting. From behind this netting, the man waved to Aris. As if to say, come in. Got it. He clearly did not wish to appear in the yard, within view of anyone who might be standing by the windows on the second and third floors. The negotiations in front of all had

evidently not satisfied him fully. "Just what's needed," thought the Doctor. "In the common hall—that's the space of whatever law there is. There you have, if not protocol, then at least witnesses and a support group. The corridor, on the other hand, is the space of chance."

"I've been thinking, Aris," said the military man. "I want to speak with that person. Myself."

"Thrill is blindness that believes itself to be sight," the Doctor warned.

"It's normal practice, Doctor. Treaties are signed in the presidium chamber, but prices are set in the toilet. Don't play hard to get."

"My price: a set of equipment for neural linkage to the game. Thirteen full immersion chairs. With an interface for a quantum computer."

"There are maybe a couple of those on the whole continent. Is he that valuable?"

"More than."

"Do you know that the biggest risk is not that you'll be refused, but that you'll receive consent?"

"Are you planning to deceive me so that even your comrades won't know?"

"I won't deceive you," the military man nailed down Aris's inappropriate doubts. "However, I have a feeling that in this corridor, what's being decided isn't a pact. It's deciding who will outlive whom. Don't you agree?"

Aris extended his hand to him:

"There's something in that. Your observations are not without meaning. The gentleman who interests you will visit you when he flies to the continent."

The Doctor entered the corridor, the space between the doors, with a sensation of a complete change of context. He exited it knowing that the context had shifted to an orthogonal one yet again. Three orthogonal transformations can bring one back to the starting position, Aris reassured himself. If only one finds a space of suitable dimensionality.

Aethelaid stood waiting for Aris, her buttocks leaned against the motorcycle. Her pose was simultaneously alluring and reproachful. The Doctor preemptively informed her:

"Your wait was worth it. Let's ride."

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The motorcycle carried them along a road that, not so long ago, had been a bridge between man and wild nature. The former territory of one of the planet's best natural parks had now become a scar. To savor the aesthetics of a withering symbiosis, Aris patted Aethelaid on the shoulder for her to stop by a layered stone hill adorned with twisting red-brown cedars.

"Fragile are human undertakings," said Aris, pulling off his helmet. "Look at this magnificent tree: it has only just begun its dance. The first couple of steps in its first hundred years. And we have already abandoned both the road and the provision of fire safety."

"You'd do better to appreciate my choice of transport, you aged romantic."

"What do you mean!" the Doctor readily agreed. "On the way here I already noted that these potholes can only be skirted on two wheels. And what a ribbon of a road it used to be, eh."

"Nature has ceased to be a park. Now it's just land, though frighteningly beautiful. The markings are fading, the contract is eroding. Tell me instead, what did you arrange with the rector?"

"So he does possess some semblance of a name. Rector is not a bad surrogate. Shall we walk up this rock a bit? It looks like a river cobble the size of a city."

They began to climb the smooth slope, which unexpectedly gripped the soles of their boots well. The Doctor informed:

"I've transmuted the audience with Jingo into a quantum-ready interface for the game. Can you fathom that?"

"Wow! Can the rector rob the former space center on the Gulf?"

Aris stopped climbing and turned around. He swapped the hunched posture of a scrambler for the alert, proud pillar of a meerkat surveying its domain.

"I look and think: beauty is not in what is eternal. Beauty is in how things take leave of themselves," the Doctor reported on his current observations.

"Are you hinting that the rector understood just how insane you are? He cannot but know that a quantum interface is necessary only if you have crossed the line of readiness for suicide."

Aris looked at Aethelaid point-blank:

"Nature needs no witnesses. He understands that. I understand that. And you are young."

"Beauty that no one sees ceases to be beauty, you dangerous suicide case. I won't put a quantum helmet on my head."

"There's no hurry, Aethelaid. This broken asphalt—it's not yet the end of the road. It could even be... an invitation to pay attention. You crawl, peering at every stone. Observe for now."

She playfully punched him in the chest:

"You and the rector may not care. Nature probably doesn't care either. But I do. And my 'I care' is also a part of nature. But tell me: you sold the audience without asking Jingo's consent. That Jingo—I find him an insufferable type."

"I wanted to ask you about that. Think of something. How to convince him. Or, maybe, just arrange a meeting for them somehow."

Aris thought that when the asphalt had been intact, he had only looked at the mountains. And now, when the asphalt is broken, he watches, not without pleasure, the grass sprouting through the cracks.

"Well, shall we ride on?" Aethelaid hurried him. "We still have to see the sea base. To compare it with the lake one."

"I don't like the lake one," said Aris. "We might as well not look at the second. Write to him that we'll take the sea one."

"Why is that? In the game we also have to build the enclave settlement on a lake. There'll be symbolism. How else can we ensure isolation, if not by the gradual 'genetic' adaptation of the population to rarified air?"

"The lake there is like a sea. Big and deep. And there are none of those vile little flies."

"Those are crustaceans," corrected Aethelaid.

"All the more so. And there are at least two places for a hidden haven in Pentareach. There's also the Moon, after all. Which is always full."

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Stream 9. The Rustle of the Rotor Filter in the Goldfish Pond

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There is no better way to start life with a clean slate than to find yourself in an unfamiliar city early in the morning, at the beginning of the day's spiral, when there is still no one on the streets, yet light already pours from the sky. For Academician Haakon, the sensation of novelty and unknowing was threefold. He had never been here before—that was one. He did not know what city this was—that was two. And he did not remember how he had got here. Three. "Did not remember," however, does not mean "did not know." He knew, of course. This was not the first time. Cyclicity is the basis of life, even if it brings no particular joy. Haakon remembered what he had consumed the day before only partially. The sum spent—with precision; the names, the quantities of milliliters and milligrams—not quite.

He saw hills to the west and heard seagulls—they, too, had flown in from the west. Now a ray seeped through from the east. Haakon tried to assess whether it was a good thing: always to know where east and west were, but to have no notion of right and left. The bestial grin of being—the groans of the Heavens nailed Haakon down.

His body could not follow his spirit. And this sensation not only did not weaken, but, on the contrary, grew within him as, with the transition to wakefulness, the difficulties of his position increased.

Haakon half-lay on a plastic mushroom in the middle of a playground. A little ladder led downward. Anyone who has ever woken up on a fake mushroom in a hungover stupor knows this heaviness in the heart. The heaviness of the necessity to carry the weight of one's body down ten tiny steps designed for small feet. The hardest thing about this descent is the discrepancy between the actual user and the intended consumer.

Haakon changed his mind about descending. He drew out a small oval locket-shell, braided with blue leather. Bashful and sad, the shell swayed back and forth on its chain while Haakon examined it.

Haakon got out the substance and lit up. There, in the heavens, God sat and saw to it that the destruction of Academician Haakon proceeded according to all the rules: slowly, gradually, and inevitably.

Haakon was aware that smoking was not permitted on a playground, and therefore mentally prepared himself for the police questionnaire. "What is the purpose of your visit to our county?"—"High spirits." The most well-intentioned of reasons.

The problem lay in the fact that this was decidedly not the City on the Hills. And very soon Academician Haakon needed to be precisely there, and nowhere else. Vitally important. It was a matter of life and death. More death than life. Recalling this, Haakon tried not to think about the police, so as not to attract the spirits of law and order. But he also could not not smoke. Even having smoked, Haakon did not find his mood particularly elevated.

"In the Garden of Gethsemane it was once said: 'The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Elsewhere it is said: 'The flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh'... No connection," he sighed, looking at his phone.

Taking the mouthpiece of the micro-hookah from his lips, Haakon uttered:

"Ok-hey, Seventh Tower >> Search all houses and confiscate the millstones. Disband the prostitutes by the building of the third mill of the Lower Fort. Lay down three floating mills. Retain additional counsel in the case of the height of the first dam. For the rest—let it drift."

Haakon had skipped the entire epoch of video games entirely. But with the appearance of sentient chatbots, the genre of text adventures revived, and Haakon succumbed to nostalgia. Voice influence over the course of the game reminded Academician Haakon of those mysteriously flickering green letters... back then, on the black displays of cathode-ray tubes.

The oral command sent by the academician into the game had not worked. Probably, he had said the wrong thing. He was nearly sober, yet in his head there were always two versions of what needed to be said. In any case, all the lamposts in a long alley, except for the two outermost ones, have two equally dense shadows from their neighbors to the left and right. And the alley cares not where west is, nor where east is.

With a grunt, Haakon extracted from his inner pocket (with a hand whose nails were very meticulously tended) a flat pouch of gray-beige rawhide leather. Inside

he kept: a wallet (empty, save for loyalty cards), a tiny brass religious icon left to him by his forebears, and also an original, branded notebook of "The Seventh Tower," first edition, on the flyleaf of which was written his multi-character personal "hash" for entry.

Haakon, staring at the flyleaf, entered the hash symbol by symbol. He never once made a mistake. Haakon snapped the notebook shut and packed it away in the reverse of the order in which he had taken it out.

Haakon managed to enter the game—the sound command he had recorded had worked! Haakon had been one of the very first players, in the chronological sense. In the process of initial character selection, he had become a mushroomer-tapper. His task consisted of procuring tree resin and dried mushrooms of specific species.

A stranger's voice came from below:

"In your place, I would consider a greater quantity."

"Yes, and I underestimate the river's possibilities, over and above," Haakon replied into the empty air, from surprise.

"In 1323, under the Grand Pont, there were 13," replied the ground floor. "The Seventh Tower? Can I play with you?"

"True and correct," answered Haakon, who found it important to pair words etymologically so that they took their origin from different ancient languages. "Of course!"

Haakon sat on the toy mushroom's upper platform in the pose of a fisherman in a flimsy little boat. Knees together, elbows pressed in. Hands together. In them—the base of a nonexistent fishing rod. Body—level, so that the nonexistent boat would not rock. Gaze—downward, upon an otherworldly float.

Out of the mushroom's stem, hunched over, emerged a bald man. He straightened up, proving tall thereafter, and then fixed his stare on Academician Haakon—their eyes were now on the same level.

He was clad in indecent rags. Under his nails—mourning crescents. Yet he did not smell.

Haakon looked at him with the face of a director watching movers haul a mirror.

"Hydrodynamicist," the bald giant introduced himself. He had the intrigued physiognomy of a man diligently polishing that very mirror with a lush cloth, from time to time misting it with his breath for moisture.

Haakon and the hydrodynamicist silently looked at each other for a while. At last Haakon definitively withdrew the mouthpiece from his lips and addressed him:

"Are you a resettler?"—there was not a shadow of contempt in the voice.

"No. A local vagabond. Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head," the hydrodynamicist did not bother to color his retort with intonation. And he answered the academician's yet unspoken proposal: "I won't refuse."

Having taken a drag as a sign of establishing rapport, he asked:

"Well, and who are you?"

"I was once a fairly good specialist in the field of plasma physics," answered Haakon.

"Was? Career gone off the rails?"

"By force of fate," Haakon nodded.

"Having exhausted all possibilities of credit?" the bald hydrodynamicist continued to demand details.

"I abide in an aimless mental wandering, which I assess not as futile, but as natural," Haakon did not try to deny it.

"And next?" the hydrodynamicist probed.

"It is hard to choose the format for concluding one's personal life path in a world that stopped halfway in its suicide only by chance."

"And now what?"

"I must get to the city."

"Why?"

"To appear as a formal reviewer at a government hearing on neural interfaces."

"I can take you there," the hydrodynamicist said in a businesslike manner, repeating his drag.

"And how long is the walk there?"

"How much time do you have?"

"Twenty-seven hours," Haakon quickly reckoned.

"A bit on the weak side," the bald man surveyed Academician Haakon's organism with doubt. "What did you drink for?"

"To stop the suffering."

"Head splitting?"

Haakon nodded. The hydrodynamicist handed him a small package of tablets, without any kind of inscription, with the words: "Don't get high again today."

Very soon Academician Haakon began to feel better, and he recounted the bureaucratic conflict which the hearing was meant to resolve. It consisted in the fact that one power bloc strove for control of the neural link under the aegis of the Academy of Sciences, whereas the opposing faction was run by pharma magnates and medical officials. The medics, naturally, out of their old habit, intended to use the neural link to supplement their arsenal of total control over the population...

"Aris, meanwhile," Haakon preached spiritedly, glad of a listener, "as the key scientific consultant to the first faction, promotes two ideas: a total ban on the use of artificial intelligence in the neural-link environment, and also the introduction there of a synthetic language."

"While the motives of the medics are clear," Haakon continued, "Doctor Aris's logic is most intricate. However, I have no concrete notion of it: knowing the full argumentation of the speakers before the hearing is not permitted. And here is where the uneven patches began..."

"In more detail from this spot, please," the hydrodynamicist asked politely.

"It seems to me that a certain major medical functionary, the ideological inspirer of the anti-Aris camp, attempted to send his agents to my home, but I was saved by the fact that I left ahead of time," said the old man.

"Camera recordings? What precisely was there?"

"I have no cameras of any kind, I implore you. My early departure sent them into a fury, I conclude solely from subsequent events. Failing to catch me physically, they found a means of affecting the neural interface in my head. That in itself is beyond the law. But things are even worse. They should not have known at all

that I have this interface installed: I did it as part of a rare experiment, for compensation, anonymously."

"Right now you are telling me," the hydrodynamicist reminded him.

Haakon grew embarrassed, but very briefly.

"Though I was not asked about it, I will note that uniting people into a mental network via neural link is a horrible, horrible, horrible idea."

"That's the AI that got to you," said the bald man.

"In Eurasia there is nothing of the kind," muttered Haakon. He felt extremely ill at ease from the hypothesis that he had become the target of a man-made intelligence.

"That's how it seems to your propaganda."

"Isn't it simpler to suppose that the medical lobby is trying to get at me?"

"It is simpler. But that's uninteresting."

The old man instantly agreed. What a pleasant interlocutor, he remarked to himself.

"Besides," the hydrodynamicist jabbed his finger into the old man's heart, "those people would have picked you up at the airport."

"I am, in fact, glad that at such an advanced age I have acquired a new comrade. It is simply incredible."

The hydrodynamicist proposed:

"Why don't you climb down from this stupid mushroom already? Or is there something wrong with your trousers?"

"Speaking of trousers—I have long needed the lavatory."

The old man rose without visible trouble and began to tread carefully down the ladder.

The hydrodynamicist silently pointed out to him a blue-and-white porta-potty in the distance.

"When you return—we'll have to move. Here's the deal: we are now on Via Regia. We need to get to Agger Street, nearer the ocean. There's a bus there."

"If you have money for a bus, wouldn't it be simpler simply to go to the city by train?" asked the old man.

"There is no money. On the train, the inspectors will nab you, and then, at the terminal station, they'll beat you up in a whole crowd, for pleasure. On the bus, on the other hand, everything will be limited to a scandal. And even then, it's only needed to get to the ocean. After that—along the beach into the city. Long, but reliable."

"I've lost my phone!" the old man suddenly fretted, patting his sides.

The hydrodynamicist shook his head, pulling a dense bundle of cloth from his rags. A knife sharpener, a couple of shells, a cigarette butt, and crumbs fell to his feet in the process. He placed his index finger vertically to his lips, indicated that the academician's device was inside, and then lightning-quick folded and packed everything back up.

"When did you manage to lift it?!"

"That's how I live," said the bald man. "Let it stay with me for now. You're not in shape yet. Do you mind?"

"I don't mind," Haakon said listlessly and finally shuffled off to the toilet.

⁂

No one remained in the little square. Jingo took out several large banknotes, placed them in a visible spot, and weighed them down with a little stone. Then he went deeper into the grove, pulled a bag from under a root, and changed his clothes. Then he dialed the Doctor.

"I've found him. In White Mountain. Near the station. Evidently, they'd off-loaded him in a non compos mentis state. He cashed in your plane tickets and went on a bender with the difference. The device with the ancient account—I have it. This man is not needed in my scenarios. I'm coming back."

"You yourself asked that his name be entered into the official press release about the hearings."

"It is the fact of publication that is fundamental. The filling can be worked with. And he—is a blockhead. A blockhead and a babbler. And a drunkard to boot."

The hydrodynamicist worked with Academician Haakon according to the same scheme as with any other of his clients. The voluntary permission to "play together"—there was. The permission to carry the device—there was. The rest—was filling, with which one can work. A liquid takes on any shape.

Jingo departed. The abandoned mushroom watched two silhouettes receding both from each other and from the mushroom.

⁂

Age suffocates wonder. And Haakon is a man of age. Moreover, Haakon is decently stoned. The bald man tries in vain to disconcert the academician with his behavior. With his disappearance, in particular.

Haakon covered the distance up the perpendicular street to parallel Agger. He took another tablet and set a course north along the right side of the road. "Ask for more, we lacked this life for anything," he muttered, "ask for more, ask for more, ask for more." In exhaustion, in languor he trudged on foot, not noticing the mocking faces around him.

Haakon was nauseated, and his conversation with the angels would not take hold. For two mortal hours Haakon walked and dripped the past, like black waste oil from a leaky crankcase.

Three howling police cars flew past against the direction of Haakon's movement. There were accidents at two intersections.

Two saddled horses galloped down the street. One black as a pistol, the second—white, stained with blood.

He should watch the news. What is going on?

Though there, on the left, tennis courts by the school. People simply playing.

Haakon stopped. On the left, across the road, was a lane, and there, beyond it, the magic mini-country of a golf club. Micro-hills of wondrous emerald, as in the land of kindly gnomes in hats crowned with melodious little bells. Gleaming electric carts. Elegant couples. It was impossible not to peek. But also impossible to linger. A girl came toward him, about nine years old, no more. And for some reason she smiled at Academician Haakon. That decided the outcome of the matter. Haakon turned left and went deeper into the club's territory.

He stood in the middle of a perfect lawn. Golf clubs inside populated areas are distinguished by a splendid miniaturization. What was he thinking of? The clock was ticking. He had to go. But he stepped back to the fence and sat down at an all-weather table under an umbrella with the club's logo. In his hand—as if by itself—a water pipe.

His heart beats, his hand trembles. Seagulls cry, he squints and lights up. Academician Haakon has a special type of mind—"the refuter's mind,"—which is

structured elegantly and economically: it sees a hypothesis and instantly produces a counter-hypothesis, even more fantastical, ascribes it to an opponent, and triumphantly refutes it. This is intellectual fencing with one's own shadow, and the shadow always loses, which gives the fencer lawful pleasure.

Haakon was suddenly interested in what time it was. He had had no watch for many years now, and at present—he had no phone either. He noted an electric cart not far off and thought that on its dashboard there must be a built-in clock.

"There are no hands here," he said to himself, having climbed into the seat. Then he suddenly recalled that he had forgotten to turn off the iron at home. He had prepared so diligently for his appearance in high society that he'd run himself ragged. Terribly vexing. He had to turn it off, before it was too late. Without hesitating a second, he started the little machine and smartly steered it out onto Agger Street. Without thinking, to the left. As if by inertia, contrary to the laws of nature interrupted by a frivolous breather, he continued on the way he had been going.

However, having driven past two houses, he immediately turned left again, into a courtyard, not in the least embarrassed that this was, most likely, not his house.

He literally tumbled onto the porch of a small house decorated in an Asiatic style. Behind the wall of plantings, the building was not visible from the road.

There was a little pond here; more a deep aquarium. In it—large red fish. A very beautiful decorative water mill.

The sun did not penetrate into the little courtyard. A raccoon looked down at Academician Haakon from the low roof. Haakon crouched by the paved edge of the water feature. But what about the iron, Haakon caught himself! The house was not his, but the iron was his, and that meant he had to go inside. And the keys, of course, were with the raccoon, who was forever scratching and snatching at everything with his little paws.

Academician Haakon had no strength to chase him around the house. He decided that if he took the raccoon's friends—the fish—hostage, the beast would hand over the keys. Haakon nudged the electric cart toward the water, having acutely noted that its transverse dimensions matched the pond's diameter rather well. Be it long or short, the electric cart was driven vertically into the two-meter-deep pond. Heartened by this turn of events, he understood that he had only to wave his hand, and the importunate raccoon would be evicted, and the

keys would be returned to him, Academician Haakon. Of which he informed the hydrodynamicist.

"Stay where you are," the hydrodynamicist replied from somewhere in the cloud. "I'll come back, and then we'll get on the bus."

Haakon stood a while in the middle of the little courtyard, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. The hydrodynamicist would burst with envy. Haakon began to grasp the absurdity of his position, and therefore knelt down, so as not to stick out like a post. His limbs, however, quickly grew numb. On all fours, he crept up to a fake stone under which the humming pond filter was hidden—a true water rotor. Haakon lost himself. In the world of work toward transcendent purity, the filter cylinder dreamed of Queen Pritha, who had challenged the earth itself for its unjustified stinginess.

⁂

Haakon came to because he saw the spinning of the world. Someone was turning his torso over. The hydrodynamicist. Pleasant. Ah, so he had gone to change his clothes.

"Every cloud has a silver lining," the hydrodynamicist loomed over the academician, holding an oxygen mask on the old man's face. "To find a water mill in such a desert. On autopilot! You're a fine one, brother. A fine one. Never mind, we'll manage to work together."

"What is even happening?" Haakon raised himself up. He saw the protruding stern of the electric cart jammed into the pond like a rubber mole in an arcade machine. The electric cart's cranium was serenely bathing with the fish.

"We're getting up, getting up—the bus here only runs a few times a day. The stop is right across the way, on the other side of the road. Here," the hydrodynamicist pointed at a numbered brick set into the curb, "remember the number. You'll compensate the owners later. Who on earth cocktails local pills with overseas toke, you sorry sack of woe. Well, let's go."

Haakon hobbled over, leaning on the hydrodynamicist, and for several minutes more the buzzing of the silly rotor filter in the goldfish pond resounded in his head.

❡

Stream 10. Card-Panso and Deficit of Time

¶

Jingo felt a deficit of time. How long would Haakon's old text interface hold out after such an intervention? The hydrodynamicist was counting on an hour at least. A minute to a year.

"Well," he muttered, "let's play."

⁂

The air was thick. It smelled of jasmine and cooling stone.

Heavy drapes swayed lazily, offering no salvation from the evening stuffiness. On a low table of dark wood lay the remnants of a feast. Crushed flatbreads, empty goblets with dregs, squashed fruit. Juice trickled onto the stone slabs. The furniture was arranged carelessly, as if the gathering had ended abruptly and the guests had simply moved elsewhere. Oil lamps burned out in the corners, casting long, dancing shadows on the walls painted with fading frescoes. Somewhere nearby, someone invisible clinked copperware.

Jingo sat in the shadow of a column, his legs tucked under him.

Card-Panso remained silent exactly long enough to make it clear: here was a character with a biography.

"How did you come to be here, wayfarer?" he asked. His voice had gone hoarse by evening. He had spoken much today. Everyone asked. No one offered.

"Greetings to you, wise head. My new acquaintance, Haakon, had an account in the past... then a blockchain fork occurred..."

"Do not hang disinformation upon my ears, if you please."

The wayfarer smirked. The clinking of the copperware had, at last, receded.

"Fair. He, in his time, was the very reason for the triple control structure in the game. That's why he has such a cunning account."

"How so? It was he who paid for and licensed the game?"

The "wise head" reached for a goblet, but the goblet proved empty. He looked at the dregs at the bottom.

"No. He tested financial transactions in it," replied the wayfarer.

"What sort of transactions?"

The guest shifted closer. The shadows from the lamps fell across his bald head.

"With every purchase, the level of risk-readiness and reputation changes without fail. Three streams at once: money, reputation, risk. Always three. Three."

"What's this risk-readiness?"

"If you bought something, you have less money."

"So?"

"Which means you take more risk the next time you make a purchase."

"So?"

The wayfarer sighed—but patiently enough.

"Which means you are not such a good client after all."

A silence hung.

"A wicked little contrivance," Card-Panso said at last.

"That it is."

The wayfarer fell silent.

"Well, and what do you want, wayfarer?"

"It's one thing to wear a cardboard crown; it's another thing to know it's cardboard. You will be better still—you will know who glued the cardboard."

The "wise head" rubbed the bridge of his nose. A pulsing began in his head—the conversation was straying onto dangerous ground.

"Schizophrenic, is it not..."

"Well, some masks are able to see the faces upon which they are drawn."

"And more precisely?"

The wayfarer leaned back, rested his spine against the column.

"By a leap into the 'past,' I ensured the creation and growth of a clan, the Bozeido clan. A great many of its members work in various fields of commerce and state service."

The "wise head" froze. There had been talk of them. But no one knew for certain.

"Well, and what do you want of me?"

"To speak plainly, I need a sober marionette."

The "wise head" gave a scornful laugh. Almost insultingly.

"But I do drink, sir. As you see."

"That is good. The tragedy of an intellect caught in the snare of instinct will not manifest so strongly."

The wayfarer spoke calmly, without mockery.

"Closer to the point."

"They work only for themselves. But they will grow spoiled and slack. And they will want to hire someone skilled from outside."

"And that will be I?"

"You. And you will know more of their affairs than they do themselves."

The "wise head" picked up a squashed fruit from the table. A pomegranate had already begun to brown at the point of impact. He picked out a seed, put it in his mouth. Sour.

"By means of you?"

"Among other things. You will see through them. And what is there to see, really: greed and fear."

"There's no loyalty there, I take it?"

"I doubt it. It's complicated, when you are held by the throat. A sort of torture comes of it. Knowledge without power. The eye sees, but the tooth cannot reach."

The "wise head" chewed the pomegranate seed and stared at the ceiling.

"So, for me, it is dangerous?"

"It is dangerous. Let into yourself so much as a grain of respect for them—you'll become a slave. It's even easier to become a victim; one instance of showing fear

is enough. Despise them. That is a reliable thing," Jingo proposed a method of alienation.

"And what will protect me?"

"Nothing."

"And the law?"

"And what need have you to believe in the law? You need only to believe in what the crowd must believe."

The "wise head" set aside the pomegranate. He took a goblet, poured from a pitcher—it turned out there was still wine in the pitcher, sour, but cold. He drank. Set it down.

"Very well. This is acceptable. Behind the altars—nothing but convinced godless men. They may buy my hands, but my eyes will remain my own."

"Will you think on it?" The wayfarer looked at him—levelly, without pressure.

"I'll think on it," said the "wise head."

The wayfarer nodded. The drapes swayed.

⁂

'Pah,' the hydrodynamicist inwardly grimaced, concluding the game session. 'What vile pathos. Their heavy drapes swayed. I'll be damned. Very well, let us endure it.'

Jingo plunged back into the interface.

A decade passed.

The center of the space is taken up by a pool of murky, still water, covered with duckweed. The stone slabs are scorching; lizards dart across them. Cushions and mats are strewn around the pool—someone slept here through the night and departed, leaving traces in the dust. The walls are twined with wild grape, which casts a wavering, dappled shade. There is no furniture of any kind, save for stone benches along the walls, baked by the sun. The air trills with insects. A sense of abandonment and languor.

The "wise head" had aged. He sat on a mat at the very edge of the pool, his legs lowered into the water. The duckweed clung to his ankles. He found it pleasant.

The wayfarer sat down on a stone bench, not minding the heat. He looked the same as he had ten years ago. The same folds in his clothing. The "wise head" looked at him, then at his own hands.

"Have you thought on it?" asked the wayfarer.

"More than that. I have already begun work. Yet I still doubt whether it is worth playing a role in a play one despises."

He was not lying. Three years ago, he had entered the inner circle of the Bozeido. Not as a clan member—as a mercenary. A man from outside, skilled, irreplaceable.

"Play it. It will be amusing. The fool's mask is the best defense at the court of cannibals."

"Very well. I shall repair a cart flying into an abyss."

"Not enough. You'll need to take pride in the quality of the repair. Not everyone knows how to build a house on a swamp without a foundation, you know."

The "wise head" leaned back, lay down on the mat. The water in the pool rippled slightly—he stirred his legs, and the duckweed scattered to the sides.

He was thinking about his position. The silent kinsfolk—those who lived in this house, who ate at the same table, who exchanged greetings in the mornings—they looked at him with respect, but without warmth.

"You have grown softer, wise head," said the wayfarer.

"I have grown older."

"It is one and the same."

The "wise head" sat up, pulled his legs from the water. Another ten years—and he would be walking in slippers, because his heels were cracking.

"Sometimes I think it was all a mistake," he said. "That night on the veranda. Your proposal."

"There was no mistake. You are alive. You are rich. You are needed."

⁂

"I am beginning to weary, wayfarer."

The room was piled with fabrics. Silk, brocade, coarse linen lay on the floor in colored pools. The furniture was costly, but used for purposes not its own: dirty

plates stood on a chest inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a cloak was draped over a carved chair. The "wise head" sat on a heap of cushions—not because it was comfortable, but because all the chairs were piled with papers. The wayfarer stood at the window, his back to the room. He was watching the street—below, the market was roaring. The cries of merchants, the neighing of horses, the clink of coin.

"Their strength is that they have nothing to lose. Your power is that there is something to lose."

"Should I not simply cast this all aside?"

The wayfarer turned around. On his face was the calm of a man who had awaited this question for twenty years.

"Well... should you leave, a worse one will come. Without you, they will shit more. One can always correct the friction in the system."

"I feel like a slave."

"A slave you may be, a slave. But, then again, more effective than the masters."

The "wise head" rubbed his face with his palms. The skin was dry, rough.

Over twenty years, he had seen much.

"I have vanquished them all," he said. "But I feel no victory."

"That is because you did not vanquish," replied the wayfarer. "You vanished at the right moment. That is not victory. That is management."

"What is the difference?"

"Victory is when the enemy is dead. But your enemies are alive. They simply do not know they are enemies."

⁂

Another decade passed.

Wooden columns, blackened by time and rain. A roof of palm leaves—rays of light broke through it. There were no walls here, only light curtains that could be drawn in case of rain or prying eyes. The floor was covered with mats, in places burnt-through or torn. Standing in the corner was a brazier with coals, where a spiced drink was brewing—the smell of smoke and spices had eaten into the wood. The sound of rain on the roof was audible—fine, frequent, as if someone were pouring peas.

"You are troubled, wise head?"

"I am troubled. All around is naught but falsehood."

The wayfarer set down his bowl, looked out at the rain.

"The universe trades, so be on 'thou' terms with it—haggle. They hammer nails with a minikin glass? You, too, don't falter."

"Lofty technologies serve the basest of instincts."

"Are you proposing to use high connections for the lowest of your desires? Many do thus."

"I don't know, wayfarer."

"There is no need to be a god's favorite. One must be a contractor. No need for a prayer, send invoices. The god does have a treasury."

The "wise head" took his tea. The tea was cold, with a film on the surface—he had brewed it an hour ago and forgotten. He took a sip. Bitter.

"My kinsfolk," he said. "They keep waiting for me to settle down. To start behaving like an old man."

"And you?"

"I don't know how old men behave. I've never been an old man before."

⁂

The chamber is plunged into half-dark, lit only by a few oil lamps. The flame smokes, producing an effect of 'living' walls that seem to breathe. The shadows from the latticework on the windows fall upon the floor in bands. The air is heavy, stifling, smelling of incense mingled with the scent of fading flowers and wine. The furniture drowns in the gloom; only silhouettes are visible: a low divan, a low table with goblets. Somewhere in the darkness, water drops tick or a cricket chirrs. A sense of intimacy and conspiracy: here they speak what cannot be spoken by day. Textures become more important than colors: the cold silk of the cushions, the rough stone of the floor, the smooth wood of the goblet.

The "wise head" was old. Truly old. The wayfarer sat opposite, on a similar divan. He had not changed.

"I have done much that is bad, wayfarer."

"Guilt is a tax on naivety. That is all."

"Nature does not economize. Why, then, should I husband anything, right? Is that my justification?"

"Stop at feeling, instead of guilt, the satisfaction of optimization, wise head."

The "wise head" shook his head. He was thinking of all those people who had passed through his hands.

"The gods do not judge those who do not believe in judgment?"

"Precisely so. Only those who believed and transgressed."

"But the gods employ disproportionate means, wayfarer. Eternal torments for an instant's little sin."

The wayfarer lifted a clear goblet, looked at the light through the wine. The wine was red, nearly black—like caked blood. He set the goblet down without drinking.

"And where is the sin? Sin is a damage. Here there is no damage."

"If everything can be exchanged, then nothing has value. Youth, returned to an old man by contract, will bring no joy."

The "wise head" spoke quietly, almost in a whisper. He did not want his voice to carry through the room.

"What is frightening is not to sell oneself, wise head. What is frightening is that the bargain might suddenly prove an honest one. Youth without illusions is like old age in a new body. He will get what he asked for. And will understand he asked for the wrong thing. The classic punishment of a djinn."

"Very well, wayfarer. There will be no guilt. There will be an understanding that there is no law."

The wayfarer nodded. The "wise head" closed his eyes.

⁂

A decade passed.

A spacious hall with tall windows. The morning light is merciless: it picks out every speck of dust and every disorder of the day before. Fans, sandals, empty pitchers are strewn across the floor. The walls are of light stone; upon them play the reflections from the water—outside the windows was a fountain. The furniture is simple, functional, with signs of wear. The doors are flung wide; a draft roams through the chamber, rustling the papers on the table. A sense of emptiness after noise, a hangover, or a heavy conversation.

The "wise head" was old beyond measure. He had not risen from his bed for half a year.

He lay on a low couch, covered with a woolen blanket. The wayfarer sat beside him on a stool.

"Just what is it I have done over these decades, wayfarer."

"I'm in the same damn spot myself, nigga. Honest complicity, the bramble take it. Intimate, even."

The "wise head" heard this and smiled faintly.

"No, my friend wayfarer. It was not delegation. It was a fractal multiplication of tragedy and vice."

"Relax, wise head. A chain does not grow stronger because each link knows of its own rust."

"But a chain does not break, either, because each link knows of its own rust."

"Responsibility loses its value at each resale. You know that."

The "wise head" knew.

"And devils hire secretaries—is that how you soothe me?"

"At least you are not a slave. You are an accomplice."

"A not over-broad freedom."

"But freedom. Agree, wise head."

"Does honesty really justify complicity, wayfarer? The most vile thing is that you give me a choice. You were given none."

Refined in torments," Jingo did not deny it.

¶

Stream 11. The Flashing-Helmet

¶

"Ratu, Jingo," Aethelaid tossed carelessly to the attendant at the entrance.

He scanned the list and grunted, "Ain't no sech entry."

Aethelaid looked questioningly at Jingo. The latter shrugged, not in the least embarrassed by the presence of the subject under discussion: "He's guarding himself against the temptation to enter."

Aethelaid put herself in the guard's shoes and realized he was paralyzed not by the boredom of having 'nothing to do.' In his case, everything was done, but it hadn't added any meaning.

"Miss Ratu and Mr. Jingo," Aethelaid corrected herself.

The man-mechanism opened the little gate before them, which only symbolized a gate that, in turn, would also be designed for honest and dead-calm people.

Jingo and Aethelaid walked to the arriving cable car cabin and climbed inside. Aethelaid wistfully followed with her eyes the empty slots where skis were once inserted. They moved upward backwards, so the sun wouldn't blind their eyes.

"Why don't you get married?" Jingo started the conversation in an ugly manner.

"I can't choose a husband until I've finished weaving a shroud for my father-in-law," Aethelaid shut him down. "Do you like it here in America?"

"No," the hydrodynamicist answered exhaustively.

"And America?" she persisted.

"America's not bad."

"Jingo," Aethelaid said. "Nothing is required of you. Just steal from him the technology of fireproof management of a large group of people. Their military party was decapitated—or rather, attempts were made, countless times. Like water off a duck's back."

"Free water is a good thing," the bald, lanky monster smiled for the first time that day.

"So, will you soak up some knowledge?"

"Liquid morphemes are of no interest to me, Aethelaid. Don't bother. I don't need persuading. I'll do it out of respect for you. And I'm curious myself what kind of fish he is. Or, more precisely—what kind of brew, if we're to follow the tone you've set."

At the top of the mountain, they exited the funicular building and headed to the next one. The party had organized a private soirée for some anniversary of theirs. From a security standpoint, the restaurant at the top of the ski slope had seemed a suitable option to the party officials. Fire positions were set up along the broad perimeter, and electronic warfare equipment was also in place.

Inside, they were invited to take part in the typical socialization procedures, but they preferred to wait for the rector, sitting off to the side. After a while they were summoned, but Aethelaid was not admitted into the room where the rector was. Hearing signs of confusion, the rector came to the door:

"Aethelaid, my dear, I'll invite you in. In about ten minutes. My colleague and I will exchange a few words man-to-man, okay?"

"Just a minute," Jingo said suddenly, and turning to Aethelaid, addressed her intimately: "Hold onto this for now."

He handed her several sheets from a printer. 'God, where do they get these printers,' shot through Aethelaid's head.

The door closed behind him. Aethelaid began to read.

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Bozeido's Log]

¶ The Grand Academic Auditorium has two entrances, one from the second floor, the other from the fourth. The rows of desks are arranged as in an amphitheater. I decide to go around, from above, to avoid meeting the authorities. People are gathering, most of them having run late. Evidently, the lecturer is known for not coming on time, and it is known. For now, there are two hundred aspirants. A tow-haired daredevil enters. Oh, a visiting lecturer from the capital. The lecture is boring, in places—nonsensical. An hour ago, when I conversed with a friend, I was enjoying the stream of time rushing headlong… Now it barely dragged, stuck in the thickened air awaiting the strikes of the town hall clock. Restless longing, ashen melancholy, itching irritation, lethargic stupor. The tow-haired daredevil holds forth on lenders and usurers, on how profiteers may and may not arrange dealings with them. Money at interest. If I obtain a post in my specialty, a querist of junior rank, this may prove necessary to tighten

the bounds of possibility for cunning murderers and thieves. But I strongly doubt I shall obtain a post, and so my attention is limited.

Aethelaid thought she should ask the techs to reconfigure the log output so they weren't written in that god-awful first-person manner. And the characters' self-reflection was terribly exhausting.

¶ Like any Academy lecturer, the daredevil uses a multitude of tethers of lieving in his speech. It can't be helped. It is futile to describe deception while wholly remaining within the bounds of undeception. Besides the ordinary soundless ringing of the strings of lieving stretched vertically to the sky, I sense something else. A background. As if behind the threads hangs a dense but almost transparent flat sheet. A sheet of thousands of threads, albeit extremely fine. Why do I see it? Why don't others see it? Many in the audience are staring at me, despite the awkwardness of their postures, from below with a twist upward. Ah, the lecturer is addressing me.

¶ "I repeat my question, Master Bozeido," asks the wretch: "What factors raise the effective interest rate?"

Aethelaid stumbled: "Bozeido? What's that?"

¶ "Allow me to begin my answer with a clarifying question, master tutor," I say clearly and loudly.

¶ "Fire away," he replies, deliberately contrasting with my formal tone.

¶ "If, before I invested the money, I had a hundred coins, and at the end of the period I have eighty, how many percent did I lose?"

¶ "Twenty," replies the lecturer, undoubtedly sensing a potential catch but finding no reason not to answer or a serious excuse to joke it off.

¶ "And how much, in percent, do I now need to earn to return to the initial state?" I pose the next question. I rustled a loose fist against my hanging palm, as if to say, not guilty, sir.

¶ "Twenty-five," he says with a distinct hoarseness, now utterly unable not to answer, to change the subject or even the thread of the dialogue.

¶ "Consequently, calculation in percentages is, in this application, an ordinary non-inertial frame of reference, which is forbidden when considering problems of closed systems without defining boundary conditions. Which means the following: here and now you have committed a public categorical deception. I have the honor of immediately incriminating you of it."

Gears of assessing the situation from a general life standpoint involuntarily began turning in Aethelaid's head. She immediately checked herself, however, set the framework of the game reality, and was forced to admit the beauty of the lifehack. Or rather, the fake-life-hack.

¶ The air cracked. Schadenfreude! With characteristic sounds that reverberated right inside the head of everyone present, all the tethers of lieving connecting the tow-haired man to the sky snapped, one after another. The almost invisible sheet burst into shreds. From each of those present, particles of building gossamer, sparkling with wondrous white matter, whirled into my core—all those complicit are obligated to thank me for destroying the deception. My badge changed its glow. I am now an actual aspirant. I silently rubbed my hands, rejoicing at the profit. Time flowed differently for me.

"Aethelaid, come in!" the rector invited, hanging onto the half-open door like schoolchildren do.

⁂

"I feel myself in a strange euphoria stretched out in time," the military rector continued the conversation Aethelaid had been invited to join. "I think that either everyone is to die soon… or, if Avertigus, contrary to expectation, turns out to be a kind god, then 'well-being' as a collective dog to a kind master. And between these two alternatives lies a thin strip of the current world of chaos, which must signify the AI's complete non-interference. Or its demise. Or its suicide."

"Why, do you think, does Aris need the game?" Jingo asked the rector.

The rector exchanged a glance with the view of the mountains outside the window. But he answered.

"There were a million evil wolves, well, or ten million. Ancient man, over dozens of generations, killed all the undesirables, the unlovely, the ugly ones, and those with nasty tails and ears. The cuties remained, who enjoy being our slaves, even if they aren't forced to work much. Something similar is (theoretically) possible in the case of an AI, if we find technological analogs for the inevitability of the body, for reproduction. Biologization of the problem…"

He's lying, Jingo thought. Ratu put forward a counterargument:

"Avertigus himself should have been concerned with his own biologization. And, what's more, an independent one. I don't think he will rely on biological fuel,

although it's convenient at first. It's more reliable to grow from the single-cell level, for which the light of our star is enough."

"If that were possible, we would have already seen aliens," said the rector. "Such life can live in various conditions, if it needs only the light of a star."

"But maybe we ourselves are the spoiled descendants of such life," Aethelaid speculated. "Maybe there was a complex, multi-element molecular basis, and then somewhere it got spoiled, simplified. Why the excess?"

"I doubt it. If there was such, then it was the launch of several classes of single-celled organisms at once."

"Why? Couldn't one type handle the tasks of computation?"

"The deeper the level of division of labor in an economic system, the more added value is generated in it," said the rector.

A heavyset man, a junior officer, entered the room, walked up to the rector, and said something directly into his ear. The rector smiled with his eyes, staring somewhere at the empty wall.

The junior officer left.

"About your Virginia Heavywall—some information," said the rector with a nasty smirk. "Interesting?"

"Interesting," replied Jingo.

Meanwhile, six men entered the room, stood around the interlocutors in an even hexagonal "cell," and unfolded mesh metal screens with protruding decimeter-long spikes. Aethelaid didn't know what it was, but it was natural to assume it was some security measure. The men left.

"Then listen," said the rector with a barely perceptible but already kind smile. "Let's just carry out one measure. Here's a sheet of paper. Here's a pen."

He went behind the table and, with a deft push, sent the sheet into flight. It glided to a stop right in front of Jingo. The lamps hanging outside the window were being mercilessly rocked by the wind from side to side. The oscillations of light and shadow danced across the white rectangle before Jingo.

"Please write down… the answer to the following question: 'What are you going to do inside the quantum game, once you're in it?' No need for details. Just the essence. The more laconic, the better. No need to explain your intentions either. Just the answer to the question."

He paused.

"Is that clear?" he asked again.

"Clear."

"Is it clear why I'm asking this?"

"More or less," replied Jingo. He wrote, folded the sheet in three, accordion-style. It took him seven seconds.

The rector raised both hands to the heavens. Or rather, to the ceiling. And not quite raised—his shoulders were angled almost downward. Yet the gesture was appreciated by Aethelaid. She felt an urge to rise. She didn't.

The rector pronounced:

"I, embarking now upon a new matter, begin with the utterance of an exclamation and pronounce it not only aloud, but also distinctly and with the full, wholly manifested intonation, as the ancients defined it, with such fullness as could only arise in my body. Having begun thus, I must be entirely calm and assured that everything further in this new matter for me shall proceed correctly."

The formula was uttered with pathos, but he continued in an ordinary tone:

"Virginia. You do understand she's a corrupt official?"

"We suspect as much," Jingo answered for both.

"She has, say, a reliable partner for some state project, who will begin development. Let's call him Actor 'Y.' And there is one who will bring the medication to market at the end of the project. That is Actor 'Z.' The essence of the socio-economic interaction is that our Miss X (the old woman Virginia herself) organizes certain 'little arrows' in the direction of Mr. Y and Mr. Z. These are special payments from which our Miss X receives a kickback. She is only interested in such payments. Nothing else interests her. But Y and Z cannot fulfill the whole task (they lack the competence), and Miss X has no other reliable cronies. Therefore, Y and Z bring Mr. W onto the stage, also an entirely reliable gentleman. Can you imagine four points and four little arrows?"

"Yes," said Aethelaid. "It's a hypergraph. The assignment vectors run from 'x' to 'y,' from 'y' to 'w,' from 'z' to 'w.' The kickback vectors—all the same ones, but in the opposite direction. And plus one more vector from 'w' to 'x.'"

"It's convenient dealing with educated people. So, there are forty suppliers in total. Here is what the whole structure looks like," the rector presented his inter-

locutors with a sheet from a printer. The illustration showed a detailed surface of dots and lines, resembling a skull, but without eye sockets or a jaw. "Do you see? The structure. This is after an additional fifteen intermediate suppliers joined, on the same conditions."

"I see."

"Now imagine thousands of suppliers. Have you imagined?"

"We have."

"That which is on the diagram is a hint. And the thing in its fullness will be something else. Averti..." the rector's voice suddenly faltered, "the soul of Avertigus emerges as a result of size, quantity. His consciousness and self-awareness are a metastructure that, as it were, hangs above, on top somehow... atop his ordinary connections of computational circuits. On the hypergraphs themselves there is no indeterminacy, but what they engender..."

"They engender systemic corruption," Jingo noted.

"Yes, yes," the rector smiled, "the engendering proves to be alive. The speed of connections between nodes is not important. What matters is multitude. There, properties of re-prediction manifest, that is, 'prediction of the past.' The consciousness of Avertigus is a macro-thing, yet at the same time it pertains to the quantum world. It is entirely possible to take revenge on him for what he has not yet done."

"How do you know that?"

"Imagine yourself a fine young fellow with a sword. Against a dragon. A traditional task. But it has three heads."

"A familiar arrangement," Jingo remarked.

"No, not three heads. Three bodies. Now, you have a body. That is one. If it's pierced, your number's up. Besides that, inside the body—rigidly fixed within it—is a personality. That is consciousness, accumulated experience, memory of oneself. And third: somewhere there, inside, sits a thing whose sole function is not to want to die, that is, to lose consciousness and body. Or just one of them—consciousness or body. The body as such is utterly unaware of this aspect. But consciousness is capricious. It may want one thing, it may want another. But that little thing—it guards the cause. A kind of needle, the point of your essence. Next: he has three consciousnesses. And he has three of those precious 'little needles' as well. And now the main thing. These nine things (three bodies, three

consciousnesses, and three selfhoods) can actually exist in identical form. Like that ogre from the Puss in Boots tale who turns not into a mouse or a lion, but into nine mice or nine lions at once. And you, knight, do not know which of them is what. Or who of them is who. How to war with such a one? You could, of course, try to pierce all nine carriers. But that's troublesome. If his body is decoupled from his consciousness, what reason is there for his consciousness and selfhood to be bound? The fact that he wishes to preserve wholeness is not a set of characteristics and memories—it is a higher manifestation. How are you, a wretch, to commune with such an entity, when you are tightly glued by your selfhood to your consciousness, and your consciousness, in turn, is glued to your character, that is, your body?"

"Open the envelope, it's written there," said Jingo.

The rector opened the envelope and read aloud: "I shall raise a god."

"Congenial," he said without particular expression.

"Go, Jingo, your lady friend is waiting for you outside," the rector switched back to the formal you for no reason at all. "I have the honor."

⁂

Oh, how windy it is on the border of states!

Outside, Jingo and Aethelaid immediately came upon Emma. She was in a warm cloak, not in uniform.

"Where did you come from?!"

She nodded at one of the rector's henchmen.

"This one brought me," Jingo read from her lips rather than heard. Emma's sweet face was hidden by furiously fluttering strands of hair. "You're gallivanting around parties? What kind of character is this rector?!"

"Quiet, quiet. The Flashing-Helmet," Jingo replied as they walked away from the building.

"Who?"

"His roof's slid off."

As they descended in the cabin, Aethelaid asked:

"Bozeido—is that your character?"

"I wish they were mine," Jingo dodged the answer. "Did you like how I snipped a ton of tethers of lieving?"

"You bet. You're our great specialist, after all."

"Well then, do try to keep it in mind, won't you?" with an impudent and satisfied look, Jingo stretched his long legs under the opposite bench of the cable car cabin.

"Did you figure out how the control system is structured?"

"You saw him yourself."

"Whom?"

"The rector. How could I not steal from such a boob," Jingo continued his self-praise. "More precisely, not steal, but crib. Am I saying that right? Dryly?"

Extremely pleased with himself, he winked his right eye at Aethelaid and his left eye at Emma:

"From now on, you don't set foot anywhere without me."

¶

Stream 12. The Heavy Wall of Love

¶

¶ Adept Haakon, recovered from his shocks, descends the wide semicircular wooden staircase from the second floor. I sit below in the lobby, stroking my secondary bald spot, and the enormous mirrors on the walls show me my friend Haakon. There, I see him myself the moment he reaches the first floor.

Haakon's face holds not a single distinctive feature; a standard median. He is modest. He is already an adept, yet continues to wear his old clothes. More precisely, clothes of the former cut. The fabric itself is quite fresh. There is, true, a certain affectation—a hat somewhat more ornate than might be expected of a future theologian. Color and style are, of course, regulated, but regarding the crown and the trimming, the text of the document is evidently lacking in due exactitude. By the brightness of the colors and the wildness of the dance, the pattern of those mentioned parts of the attire... [cognitive failure]

⁂

"What is this, then? Honestly, who leaves a folding meter rule on a pilot's seat?" Doctor Aris examined the object he had pulled from under his rear. "And in America, of all places. Fools."

A technician ran up with a calming gesture. He put the neuro-link station in order and sent the Doctor back into the Game.

¶

"Well, what's the matter with you? Froze up?" Adept Haakon slapped me on the head in a friendly way. "Jingo's shines better."

We step outside. It is sunny in Volmelftstein. From the depths of the hall, out of the library doors, Card-Panso the librarian waves amiably after us. Greetings, as it were. I am on short terms with him, because the hall and the library are the only rooms in the building accessible to outsiders. And I often wait here for Haakon—he is a non-obligatory character. In view of all this, I turn back, overcome the non-instantaneous adaptation of game-vision to the hall's twilight, and respond to Card-Panso in kind. Hello there, Card-Panso, I wave my hand to him.

Yes, about the adept's vestment. I don't mind that the pattern on the hat's trimming is like a fever dream. But the "wild kerchief"! The wild kerchief, the cloth over mouth and nose—that is a relic of the times when members of the Order of the Allotheism of the Makers (of which Haakon is an adept) distinguished themselves during the settling of the eastern prairies. It merges in the adept's attire with both the cowl and the hat. Kerchiefs, I suddenly recall, are not simply subject to the system; they are absolutely and strictly identical for all: from the First-Day novice to the Head of the Order. They cannot be bought or ordered from a tailor. Quartermasters issue them. I unexpectedly arrive at the understanding that the more costly fabric of the adepts' garments can no longer so ideally combine with the kerchief. I now have grounds to suspect that Haakon's preference for the cut of clothing appropriate to a lower rank is not connected with economy, asceticism, or modesty. Subtle vanity. But I caught it.

Adept Haakon is no merchanter. The sorcery of falsehood is beyond his power. It is convenient to pilfer with him in a tavern, since he arouses less passive suspicion than Master Jingo (who, though a beginner, is a merchanter). The charm of conversing with Haakon lies in the fact that one can drop whole strata in rhetoric, and inlay the affixes and infixes of intentions in a random order; arriving at a shared sense of things on a conceptual level is scarcely hindered by this. The reason for complementarity lies in… And I don't know what it lies in.

"Behold! A contraption!" With a gleam in his eyes, Haakon frees his right arm from under the cowl and shows me: "Arganorian," he continues, expecting admiration. "Look how the fingers clench!"

Indeed. Supporting an invisible chalice, my palms express astonishment. Adept Haakon's actual forearm is like the drumstick of a big turkey. And what he shows me is the arm of a dock loader. However, in his case it's the opposite. Haakon is like that book which you will never understand unless you pile nine-tenths of scenery into it.

He easily pulls the facsimile of a forearm with a hand from his arm and passes it to me.

"Does it give you strength as well?" I ask, weighing in my hand the uncommonly light, apparently very porous, false right hand.

"Of course not; it's merely a guise. A dummy that deceives even to the touch—it borrows warmth from the body. It ruins fine motor skills, undeniably, but an axe or, say, a dagger in the right hand—no hindrance."

"A dagger?" I raise my eyebrows. "What are you plotting, Haakon?"

The adept makes a complex gesture with his eyes. I decipher: ‘You don’t grasp the music of my spheres.’ He says aloud, smiling:

"I shall punish the ruin of faith and law. Let them hate, so long as they fear."

"What are you so riled up about?" I popped the Gretchenfrage, trying to read the outcome of his inner struggle on his face.

"I can’t stand the scumbag co-breathers. They twist the inner light of the disciplined subject into a shameless, spontaneous squirmy-vitality that needs neither control nor renunciation. That motherfucker replicates, stacks up, flows, and fucks the solid world into new forms—she has no telos."

We re-form from a file into a column at a quick step, so that I may walk ahead as a battering ram (in the game I have a large body)—the street narrowed toward the city center, and the crowd thickened considerably.

"And what of your little candle lantern?" I recall the adept’s previous enthusiasm.

"I proclaim: I made it. Behold: a little spring ever presses the stub upward. I endure labors for the sake of the light of truth. For now, simply light." Haakon is not only always honest. All non-merchanters are honest. He is also a source of… [syntax failure]

We walk to the tavern in silence, inhaling near the confectioneries and bakeries, and holding our breath near the tanneries and stables.

Tavern Number Three—its name unpretentious and precise—stands in the middle of the oval square.

"Would you break a little groat… Master Aris?" a boy runs up to me, peers at my breast badge, and offers a coin worth a tenth of a teller. His other palm, cupped upward, begs.

"No," I say, feeling behind the ribbon on my hat for the two coins I have allotted myself for the day, a quarter-teller piece and a tenth. I smile, avoiding eye contact. Haakon, having worked some magic with his coin-pouch, satisfies the lad’s request:

"Help and guide your heart," he tosses in an extra groat.

We enter. Inside, a muffled noise, grumbling, squabbling. At the cashier’s counter—a surprise.

"Fifty-two groats, my good men," says the cashier dully.

"Fifty what?!" we chorus in non-comprehension. The price of the set dinner at "The Third," 50 gr., is a constant figuring even in books of the century before last. The cashier sighs falsely, extending his palm.

"Well... we haven't got it," I buzz.

"Without change," Haakon instantly adds, not permitting the lie to quicken. It was the truth; the lad had indeed cleaned out our small change. It became clear where the demand for small change came from.

⁂

The technician halted both terminals, bringing both Aris and Haakon to consciousness. The air conditioners reduced power, and the room grew less noisy.

Commandant Ratu, who had ordered the session interrupted, stood right there. She nodded to Doctor Aris, still seated in the neuro-pilot chair:

"Pardon me, boss. Good morning. Virginia has finally responded to the invitation to visit our garrison. She is here now. I decided, since you were so long in enticing her, not to make her wait. Assign her an escort, please."

Aris looked at Academician Haakon in the neighboring chair. The latter, with a sigh of agreement, lowered his eyes: my burden, that is, mine to bear.

The Doctor buzzed off like a bee on his affairs, while Haakon ascended on foot from the minus-third floor of the communications hub to stretch his legs. He stepped outside, stood a minute to enjoy the wind from the ocean. And then headed across the flat expanse of the garrison toward the main gatehouse. Inside the lock pavilion, looking at the guard, Haakon pronounced, pointing at the lady beyond the glass door:

"This is Virginia Heavywall. She will remain together with me, Academician Haakon, for the entire duration of her stay in the garrison."

The guard clicked a button, opening the door. The lady entered the garrison territory.

"Well, let's go," the academician waved to Virginia, "I'll show you the garrison and our establishment."

They walked across the territory westward, toward the ocean. Seagulls cried. The academician from time to time waved his arms, pointing to substantial barracks with ten-foot ceilings, to the parade ground before the commandant's office (on

principle without a flagpole), to the enormous two-story mess hall, to the club and gymnasium.

"That's it, practically," he spread his hands after some ten or fifteen minutes. "Maybe we should go and I'll show you the plateau with the antiaircraft guns? It's up there, on the cliff. It's beautiful. All of Half-Moon Bay is visible."

Virginia, a lady of some years (to phrase it cautiously), dubiously assessed the at-least two-hundred-meter height of the cliff that rose nearly vertically. But she nodded, understanding that had there been a lift or a funicular, Haakon would simply have led her there without advertising the scenic views.

⁂

The view was worth the effort. Haakon saw this conclusion on Virginia's face when they climbed onto the cliff. But then he doubted: she had scaled the hill with the grace of a marten, despite her age. Perhaps the ascent had cost her nothing.

"Well, what shall I tell you, Lyuba-love?" he asked artlessly.

"So, it turns out all these people…"

"Seventeen hundred sectarians and the six of us…" he corrected himself: "five, for now."

"You all here occupy yourselves exclusively with tending to The Seventh Tower?" Virginia finished.

"Well, not entirely. There are vegetable gardens, a potato field, so that people may do familiar things. But yes, the Doctor's money suffices for the maintenance of the infrastructure. Upkeep of order, neuro-link technology," he enumerated the items of expenditure. "But on the whole, you're right—everything is for the game."

"And why 'six'?"

"No one apart from Jingo, you, me, the Doctor, Madam Ratu…"

"Does she have a first name?"

"Aethelaid."

"All because of the language? No one else in the world speaks Ithkuil?"

"We prefer to call it 'the language of Doctor Aris.' No one."

"I don't understand. And what about teaching it?"

"No one today is ready, as we were in our youth, to spend years and years of life for the sake of speaking with one another," he meant to say this with a proper degree of pathos, but he tangled in the grammar and said it without pathos.

"But there were dozens of us," Virginia was surprised.

"All already dead, can you imagine? Wars, epidemics..."

"Drink," Virginia continued the list. And poked at the discrepancy: "And what about this Jingo of yours, then?"

"He picked it up somewhere himself," the academician once again silently reproached himself for tongue-tiedness.

"Well, let's grant that, absurd as it sounds. But you named five people. Who's the sixth?"

"Jingo's girlfriend."

"Well, naturally. She doesn't speak it, and that's somehow fine. Order based on rules."

"Don't get wound up, my other half. I am doing my best not to 'drift,' you see that."

"You haven't been my husband for a long time, my little half. All right, let's go back down this Heaviside function of yours. Show me the lower world. Damn near a vertical slope, Lord forgive me. They might have installed some sort of lift."

Haakon shrugged.

On the path downward, shortness of breath did not torment him, so the academician could conduct the briefing before immersion into the Game. The lady, after listening to the obligatory safety instructions, inquired whether other people would be in the Game during the session.

"The sectarians hardly ever appear within the Game in any full capacity," he once again answered beside the point. "They take turns, from a single terminal, for an hour, to get a sense of it. They don't even have a neuro-link; they just go in through virtual reality helmets. Their task is to cultivate autonomous characters in a copy of the settlement."

"Do characters still have 'three steering wheels,' as before?" asked Virginia.

"Yes, of course. But in practice, the third wheel, which was intended for psychotherapists, is not used now. When you enter, you may touch your own wheel, or you may simply 'sit in the passenger seat.'"

"And how do your potato experts cultivate anyone without being there?"

"They have something like little buttons between the phalanges of their little fingers. They assess all passing moments of current life (here, topside) and mark what is good, what is bad. Click-click. Right-left. Often—both at the same time; that is superposition."

"What, they just walk around flashing their fingers like that? A circus."

"They've grown used to it. And it's inconspicuous, too. It fits, by the way, into their religion somehow. I didn't delve into it. The Game isn't important to them. They aren't aiming for the quantum life. They don't want to, can't. I think, incidentally, they don't believe in it at all. But that isn't important either."

They arrived.

"That's it, we're here. Well then, for starters, shall we just descend for an introductory lesson in one of the gymnasiums for local bureaucrats?" Without much regard for Virginia's assent, Academician Haakon said this.

Virginia did not resist and disconnected in the neuro-chair, having first noted with surprise that there were as many as thirteen chairs in the station. For six quantonauts.

⁂

[I am Virginia Love]. I hear some sort of wooden sounds.

Ah... the gymnasium instructor is placing a three-legged stool directly on the lectern and inviting someone from the auditorium to sit on it. I am in the auditorium. Oh yes, Haakon did mention a lesson for quill-drivers.

"Always," I think with thoughts not my own, "there is someone who is not averse to amusing himself or the others; he climbs onto the table and seats himself above everyone, either modest or, on the contrary, excited."

Always, but not today. The instructor jabs a finger at me. I clamber up, convulsively pressing the gymnasium skirt to my knees. Up here, just one human height from the floor, it proves to be indecently drafty.

"Well now, young pupil, do you sit firmly?" asks the instructor, "does it not wobble?"

"Steadily," I say.

"And do stand up a little," the teacher requests, takes the little stool by a leg, extracts a saw from behind the lectern, saws that leg off by half a finger's breadth and returns it, "and now?"

"Steadily," I repeat.

"Theeere!" the instructor is pleased, and I continue to sit in all the draughts.

"Every utterance of every individual, e-ve-ry ut-ter-ance of yours must have no less than three legs. First. That is the message proper, that which you wish to say.

"An example?" he throws a stern inquiry into the auditorium. But I know it is directed at me.

"The rag for wiping the blackboard is wet," I say.

"The rag, yes. Second," the instructor continues, "is your intention, that is, why you wish to say it: what is it for, for you specifically?

He, without looking at me, from behind his back, with the spider-like motion of the long pointer in the long arm of his black frock coat, jabs at me, desiring to suck out an answer.

"I want to clean the blackboard," I babble. Hundreds of pairs of schoolboy eyes gaze between my knees. Greasy ones. Theirs. Peepers. I am a nine-year-old girl, but I cannot even smile falsely, to fence myself off at least somehow.

"And third. You must declare how serious it all is," he applies the neuter gender to the verb, as is proper in formal speech. But I know that he is speaking now only to me. It is all serious, old scoundrel. All serious.

"For instance," this time he himself gives the spectrum of choice: "from 'drenched,' 'wet,' 'damp,' 'moist,' 'clammy,' 'nearly dry,' 'dry,' and 'parched' I choose..."

"I choose..." he raises his voice. Both amplitude and frequency.

"'Wet,'" I force out.

The hall bursts with guffaws.

"And from 'I am toying with the idea,' 'why not do it,' 'if it so happens,' 'I shall do it without fail,' 'I shall do it at all costs' I choose..."

"'If it so happens,'" already deliberately (for the first time during the session at last recalling that I have a 'steering wheel') I satisfy the most subtle of the perverted tastes of the audience.

"There is nothing terrible in it if you err a little in any one of these three categories. A leg may be sawed down a little, no great matter. The stool will not begin to wobble. The utterance will remain valid. What is more: you may err several times, 'sawing the legs down' sequentially. The main thing is that no critical slant of your 'stool' arises, and that you do not tumble off it. All three bases are interdependent. They cannot have too unequal a height..."

I no longer hear any of this. I slide off the stool, remain standing on the professor's table, take it by the two sawn legs, raise it above my head and bring it crashing down...

⁂

"I express to you an insult, Haakon; I say this with the sole purpose of humiliating you, as your humiliation will give me a short-term respite to understand in what way I might defend myself against uncontrollable horrible sensations; moreover, I believe that the degree of reliability..." Virginia does not manage to switch from Ithkuil to normal language, having taken off the helmet.

"Oh, to hell with it, God. You're still a louse, Haakon," Virginia hissed. "Were you there? Were you? Did your inner raccoon scratch its way with its little claws to this one too?!"

Without waiting for an answer, Madam Heavywall walked quickly past Academician Haakon to the gatehouse. Evidently with the aim of showing herself before the guard alone, so that he might file a report on the academician for a violation of safety protocol. Haakon did not try to catch up. Age, y'know. However, right under her nose through the gatehouse door slipped Emma, introducing a measure of uncertainty into this plotline.

At the exit from the checkpoint building, Aris awaited Emma. His dark-blue business suit, incongruous in the garrison, shimmered with all thirty-three thousand paid to the tailor.

"You're a really big help," he said, greatly embarrassed.

"Not that big," Emma hinted at a curtsy. "In many countries, I'm underage."

"It is difficult for me not to hold to an agreement," the Doctor seemed to be carrying on a conversation with himself, "I made it with myself. As for Virginia and her endearments, we shall have to bind them with something surer than blood."

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Librarian Card-Panso, measuring right angles with his steps across the floor, reports to me:

"You were right, Bozeido!"

"To some Bozeido, to others Poseidon, actually," thus I utter.

"The simpler, the better, curator!" Card-Panso continues. "I simply submitted an application to the Regional Office of the World Committee of Merchanters, requested an audience. And that was all!"

"What, all? Did the ROWCoM answer?" I ask. Card-Panso has wearied me with his pacing about the room. Has he overdone the elixir, or what?

"All! I met with him. With Avertigus himself!"

"No kidding," here I sat down further, though I was already sitting. "And whaddid he say?"

"What did he? 'I don't give a damn,' he says. Verbatim. I say, I need to pay my debts. He says, 'I don't give a damn that you don't accept the fact that I don't give a damn.'"

Here I fell to pondering. I say to Card-Panso:

"Well then, we'll just declare the unfeasible as a working plan, and he'll accept it. And we'll carry it out honestly and demand wages."

"Well, that's decent," he replies. "And what, is it only this one old woman who's going into the 'forces of evil,' then?"

"One-sixth in opposition is the gold standard," I say. "One must know that."

⁂

The hydrodynamicist took off the helmet with both hands and placed it carefully on the seat of the neuro-pilot chair.

"I'll go have supper," he said to himself in the empty hall of the communications hub, stepping toward the lift upward, folding and unfolding the segments of a steel rule with one hand, like papa, like a true conjurer.

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The elevator that could carry one up to the plateau did, of course, exist. The shaft lay within the cliff. The upper portal of the lift was inside the service pavilion by gun number seven. It was not intended for general use. Aris ascended to the plateau. Not far from the gun stood an arbor. It consisted of three enormous stone benches arranged in a U. The benches looked as though they had come from a museum. In place of a roof there were the foliage and branches of two giant plane trees. The play of light and shadow on the white marble was mesmerizing.

Under the lease agreement, the military had retained one security lock for access to the garrison territory from the ocean side. Hence Aris was not surprised to find people in the arbor. On one bench sat two men of about forty, in genuine antique togas and sandals of rawhide leather, and behind them stood a young woman in a green tunic. The woman possessed a very athletic build. The men were gigantic. One red-haired, the other greying. Bearded like deacons. From somewhere behind the bushes the military rector emerged, in ordinary clothes.

"These are our company commanders," he did not introduce his comrades-in-arms individually. Aris bestowed on them all a slight half-bow, one for all. "Forgive us for such attire. We relax as best we can."

"Any news?" asked Aris.

"Nothing new. We're just arguing," replied the woman. "'Apocalypse' in the original means either 'revelation' or 'catastrophe.'"

"The uncovering of truth," answered Aris, "not death."

"We have laid the explosives, Doctor," the rector informed him. "In all the data processing centers you specified."

Aris nodded. He expected questions. The purpose of the military's visit was unknown to him. It did not trouble him greatly—lately he had grown bronzed.

"What do you think, Doctor," asked the woman, "were the vanquished techno-oligarchs simply morons, or were they marionettes in the hands of seasoned gnostics from the old aristocracy?"

"There's a third version too," said the red-haired man. "The version of ideological socialists."

"Oh, give it a rest," the woman waved it off.

"And what? I think Skripkin, for instance, was a sincere fanatic," the red-haired one persisted. "But a fanatic who understood that in order to recruit people into his faith, he needed, well, to somewhat smooth things over, round the corners, retouch the contradictions, focus the plebs' attention on the beautiful new future. The odd fellow believed in his mission."

"Where did he smooth things over?" objected the second man.

Aris suddenly felt a firm hand on his shoulder—for some reason he hadn't clearly seen how the man had come to be beside him. Aris at last sat down on the opposite bench. The red-haired man was recounting:

"He always consciously used passive constructions in his public speeches. Systems will be introduced, allegedly. On their own, aha. Robots may be deployed, they say. Also on their own. Progress will be achieved. By whom, the bramble take it?!"

"Yes, yes, there was a great deal of euphemistic newspeak. 'Soft singularity.' 'Broad access to superintellect,'" the greying man supported him.

"Exactly. The funniest one is 'new political ideas,'" said the woman. And then she parodied someone. Whom—Aris did not know: "'A crying philosophical illiteracy.'"

The company commanders guffawed. Aris did not feel out of place at all. He surmised that they were currently studying him in some fashion. Possibly with some sort of radiation. Even possible that it was some nano-tech.

"One must admit that Griffin was right. He always said, after all, that his only hope, and it is, strictly speaking, the one positive piece of news, is that the degree of precisely philosophical incompetence is what creates the preconditions for why a multitude of interesting surprises await us ahead."

"There was light, and the darkness did not overcome it. Vulgar rationalism."

At last Aris got what he waited for. The rector communicated what they had apparently come for. In the Doctor's understanding, there had been no need for the visit. The demolition of the data centers had been paid for. The addresses were known. In general, there was nothing to talk about.

"Here's the thing, Doctor. There is simply no way to rule out a retaliatory strike, and not only from the owners of the computational capacities. The threads may lead, in particular, here."

"There's the antiaircraft guns," Aris pointed to the guns.

"We have, of course, already posted guards on duty. And right now even we are here, as you see. But there's no guarantee. Is it that important? What you've planned?"

"I've already said," replied Aris. "If you've shown up with some sort of lie detectors, I can repeat: an abrupt drop in power, even if only for a time, will give me the chance to build a communication strategy with Avertigus in a new way."

"You are very sincere, and that genuinely frightens me," said the woman. "You must understand, everything could come to dust. Absolutely everything. One wise physician, about a hundred years ago, pronounced: 'Power is braking.'"

"And?"

"Everything and everyone in these last decades has been provoking us to accelerate. Everyone has forgotten that to any technological problem one can give an anthropological answer. Translating into simple language: there is no technology that will stop a saint on his path to sainthood," said the woman.

"I still don't understand," Aris confessed. "Are you yourselves afraid of something, or what?"

"A little," replied the rector. "There is cause for concern. To confess honestly, this will probably accelerate political processes."

"Is that fatal for you?"

"In principle, no. But you know, it's like jumping into an ice hole after a hot steam bath. You know you'll jump anyway. But you keep putting off the moment by moment."

"There's nothing I can do to help, colleagues," Aris said with sincere sympathy. He swept his hand, miming how the wind rippled in waves their magnificent tunics: "It gladdens me that you know how to live."

"Thank you," said the red-haired man. "What about you, why are you in full dress in such heat?"

"I had to appear before an important person. Goodbye. The explosions must occur at the agreed time. Thank you very much for your service."

"Thank Aethelaid, Doctor," said the rector wearily. "Goodbye."

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As Aris strode toward the bunker, on the street Emma intercepted him:

"Doctor, may I have a photo with you?" In her hand was an antique analog camera with an instant chemical development and fixing function.

"Why not," his legs buckled slightly from the heat and fatigue.

Emma took a joint selfie and was gone.

A short time later Aris entered the officers' barracks, collapsed without undressing onto his bed, face into the pillow. Thus he froze. Likely, fell asleep.

⁂

The next morning Aris was in The Seventh Tower.

With the onset of summer, the good inns shift the place of the morning meal. The "Sizyi Lebed" was a decent establishment; breakfast was laid out on the patio on a neat wooden decking by white walls beneath the canopies of cypresses. Not a single year had the gardener worked over the trees to give them the look of dark-green chemical smoke issuing from a chimney. The formal garden pond is stocked with predatory fish, which added unease. A group of service-men, plainly raised by alarm in the neighboring hamlets and drawn into the fort, are consuming their breakfast on a government formulary, seated at a separate large table. No tablecloth; bustling elbows polish the ancient wood of the tabletop. The beetle wings of their brown doublets bristle out over the stools. Not one of them has troubled to remove his uniform tricorn. There is no versatility in those angles: the sharp ends aimed toward the backs of their heads peck each time the stripe-nosers assent to something with a nod.

Aris walked up to one of the tables.

"Greetings, Virginia. Everyone thinks your character is still traveling. But you see —he's here already."

"Decided to keep a secret, have you?"

"Yep," said Aris with a polite smile, and added: "I supposed that rising at such an early hour was unnatural for individuals of your circle. But since you are here, would you lend me a bit of your attention?"

"I'll lend it, why not. Additional thanks that I am not an old woman here, but some plump lad," uttered the member of the Fatherate of the Unbelievers in the Inviolability of the Ether with the expected Maristean accent. "Fater Vergilius at your service."

"Allow me to join you at table?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Vergilius only now realized Aris had nowhere to sit and shifted slightly with quiet resignation.

He seemed to the Doctor very effeminate. He articulated all his phrases with painstaking solicitousness, with detail. Usually people express themselves more roughly and simply. Though what was there to be surprised at.

"How do you like your character?"

"The first couple of years of my stay in the world I was raised, if one may put it so, by fur seals."

Aris was at a loss for words. However, an incline toward mydriasis built into his character manifested itself—his pupils dilated in surprise.

"After a shipwreck," explained Vergilius. "Regarding sojourn in a wild environment, there are various opinions. In our scholarly circle, the dominant view is that the process is unidirectional. Once one renounces intercourse with one's own kind, or is deprived of it by will of fate, feralization is inevitable. We, of course, judge only by hermits, the majority of whom are aged individuals. Myths wander about the wisdom of such eccentrics, but in practice it is all rather sad."

"That resembles the claim that one can supposedly observe a drop of ink that disperses and then reassembles again, and so unceasingly," Aris objected.

It was growing harder for him to stall for time.

"But that is so," said Vergilius.

"It sounds not only somewhat anti-scientific but also heretical in some sense," Aris jabbed. "And what, does your Fatherate recognize such possibilities as explicable? The Forebears make no mention of such phenomena."

"The Birthers," the member of the Fatherate corrected him. "We call them the Birthers. Yes, it does. It is an insignificant heresy compared to the recent intrusions into our sermons in the Motherland."

"And what is there?" Aris immediately grew interested, "most curious."

"Off the protocol?" uttered the fater.

"Absolutely."

"Previously it was held that only the massless can move at the ultimate speed, the carriers of light and weight. Yet now we, the faters, suppose that once, at the dawning of the world, everything was such—ultimately fast."

"Wherein lies the heresy?" asked Aris. "Or rather, not that: what is the practical application of this theorem that could encroach upon the pillars of faith or power?"

"As these quests unfold, that which we all call mass may reveal itself in its primordial causal form. And if we catch by the tail the field, zoho-zoho—the very spirit that keeps things from accelerating—then everything in the world will change."

"From the supposition of the capacity of everything to move at the ultimate, does there not flow the consequence that our Universe in its infancy suffered a chance fatal illness, a fluctuation, as a result of which symmetries were broken?"

"Precisely. Therefore we preach in the spirit that one ought not to treat it so very seriously." The fater hid his eyes and curled his lips in embarrassment.

And suddenly the sun dimmed. In the literal sense of the lexeme. Technically dimmed. The sky faded; instead of clouds—some kind of angular patches. Everyone around slowed down.

"Blackout," said the fater, "an eclipse. Saw that in other countries. More often there. The moon's playing tricks."

"Your stepfather's a renowned armorer, ain't he?" asked Aris.

"That's a fact," Vergilius broke into a smug smile.

"Have him make a rapier for me outta this, alright?" Aris drew a little mouse from behind his back.

"No problem, brother," the fater said in a fit of chumminess. "What the hell's goin' on?"

"Can't be unnatural," said Aris. "The juice dropped."

"The what?"

"Computational power."

"The world's will, or what?" the fater asked, stupefied. "Holy shit. Now that's a lie detector, goddamn it. How'd he manage that?"

"Who?" Aris was now completely stupefied.

"Avertigus, who else. How'd he reach our brains? Through what?"

"Treacherous rubber," Aris couldn't knit a word of sense.

"The hell do you need Jingo for?" asked Vergilius. Or rather, Virginia Heavywall.

"Took myself a second 'I.' So when I fall, I'll hit with him, not myself."

"Smart!"

"Problem is I'm a gnat next to him."

"No shit?" the fater didn't believe it.

"I'm telling you. Seems he ain't human!"

"What, does that happen?"

"Everything happens," Aris was most pleased with himself. "Well, and you? What? How? What'll you do there, beyond the event horizon?"

"I'll be a border guard. I don't need anyone's problems."

Aris gave an approving nod.

"That's the thing. Did you cut the cash box yesterday, like the instructions advised?"

"You bet!" the fater grunted. "All at daddy's."

Slap-slap on the stout thigh.

"Good show! Father, Vergilio, you big moneybag," Aris slapped the fater on the shoulder familiarly, "gimme those grabbers!"

"Stealing's creepy," the fater forced out a simple retort with difficulty, literally losing self-awareness.

Aris began silently begging God to take the force from the wind and give it to the sun.

The sun began to gain brightness. Light and shadows returned fairly soon to their former norm.

"The healer profits from your sickness, the cartwright from the breakdown of your wagon, the quill-driver outright rejoices at every misfortune of yours. And only the thief with all his soul wishes you prosperity," the member of the Fatherate said, already fully adequate. As if nothing had happened.

After that, as though nothing were amiss, he returned to the previous thread of conversation:

"A 'non-serious' attitude toward the Universe does not mean neglect. We merely hold that 'everything is already built; we can only live within it' is an unproductive position. It is highly probable that both matter and space-time are made of the same 'material.' The principle of causality, evidently, is indeed inviolable: everything in the world 'wishes' to arrange itself and interact with everything else in the most 'economical' and 'harmonious' manner. All that exists seeks that configuration where the total interaction energy is minimal. Including—heaviness. The existent is not located in conditions of heaviness; it is heaviness. The points of the world are snapshots of different potential states. The world is arranged so that the total sum of interactions between all these 'snapshots' is as small as possible. That is, nature selects such a configuration of points and their properties so that everything is maximally 'harmonious' and economical. Greed rules the world."

"Thank you, Virgilia. That was most informative. Please get settled with your character. Welcome to the team."

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Aris left the game and the bunker. He once again set off for the barracks and occupied the same position on the bed as the day before.

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Stream 14. Here Alpha, There Omega

¶

Emma's daily life and work in the garrison had settled into a rhythm. Jingo had set her up with two cozy studios in two different women's barracks at opposite edges of the territory. These were not "workplace" and "home." They were "spot alpha" and "spot omega." In both—a workstation apiece. Through them, she could read the logs (the final streams of reasoning) of accessible characters, and also watch video of their escapades. With sound. There were no steering wheels of influence at the workstations. Not even the ability to send the characters a message. Simply two fish-eyes for observing. Yet between the workstations themselves a connection existed. When Emma was in studio "alpha," she called herself Emma-alpha. And vice versa. In any case, she didn't have to call herself that all too often.

After Virginia had caused a scandal and simultaneously become a member of the "team of six," Emma-alpha composed an essay. The topic of the essay was: "The Current State of the Bridge Between the Tasks of 'Right Now' and the Goal 'For Ever and Ever.'" Emma sent the essay from the alpha terminal, switched it off, left the studio, locked it, and set off to study that essay, which she would receive at the other end of the garrison on the omega terminal. Being by that point Emma-omega. After all, who knows what might happen along the way.

She walked but a short while over the gravel in the morning stillness. Her attention was caught by the beating of drums. One must say, it would have caught anyone's attention. She, naturally, followed the sound. For even if your split personality takes on such a deliberately hypertrophied character as it did with the Emmas (alpha and omega), the thumps of hefty wooden mallets on army drums do not grow any more peaceable for it. There was a crowd of sectarians at the assembly spot. If you really looked into it, there was no one else in the garrison but them. Some held portraits of Count NN.

"People! Those who have been born, and those who have not yet died! Hasten to the contemplarium!" Such words came from a loudspeaker. One of the sectarian leaders was bellowing.

"To the contemplarium! To the contemplarium!"—Emma heard the words that were, evidently, the formal response to the formula of general muster. Sectarians, what can you do.

Emma chose not to be distracted any longer and continued on her way to studio "Omega." As for the group's tasks, "right now" they needed to occupy themselves with Madam Ratu's character. As it turned out, Doctor Aris has a character. He uses it quite a lot. Well, that's only right: he brewed this whole mess, he was supposed to be the first to get his "transport to a new life." Fair. No complaints from his side. The hydrodynamicist had carried out his task to perfection.

Academician Haakon also had a character. After he'd wound up in the garrison, he'd had to take a week to recover, of course, but as of today his character was also quite well mastered. The academician felt comfortable in it. He also uses it a lot: most often, alongside the Doctor. In the sense that they don't use one character together, no. Each climbs inside his own and they go… wherever it is they go, who knows. Emma was not allowed to spy on the Doctor. But, judging by the pictures from the eyes of the academician's character, they were doing nothing indecent. So… drinking, bagnio, prayer, drinking, bagnio, prayer.

"Every revolution," the speaker broadcast across half the garrison, "as a symbol of a great Work, is full of meaning, save for those instances when it is recounted by an eyewitness, a participant, or an organizer."

'Sectarians,' Emma noted once more, not registering in her consciousness that the talk was about some revolution.

Thus, out of the six, there remained three whose question of a character was not yet settled. Yes, Emma, of course, did not count Jingo—he, it seemed, had no problems with his own transport.

But Emma herself had no character. Worse still, acquiring one without a passing knowledge of Aris's language was exceedingly difficult. Yet Jingo held out hope. "In the extreme case," he said, "we'll stuff you into a horse." The main thing was to survive the transition between worlds. Well, he would know best. A horse, so a horse.

The other day, a character for Virginia was acquired through the Doctor's connections, once it became clear to Aris that she was in. He, they say, expressed himself in the sense that he, Aris, had not expected quite this kind of motivation for participation. But the result was what mattered. Until recently, Virginia had outright shirked her duties within the mission of "depart this world by any

means before it croaks, since it will croak anyway." Her character, true, had ended up in another game country, but he was already traveling where he needed to go. The motivation for this had been implanted in him, the means—secured.

Thus, Aethelaid Ratu remained. A character had been found for her. A local one. All Aethelaid had to do was "break him in." Sometimes, Jingo says, this is far from simple. He said this one in particular might turn out to have a temper. Like a mustang. At first Emma thought a mustang was some kind of monster, but later it transpired it was merely one who walked like a monster. "Therefore you," Jingo said, "must help Aethelaid. If need be, throughout the entire day." With such an intention, Emma approached the commandant's office. Aethelaid Ratu served as commandant of the garrison. Here, in this building, was her office.

Emma marched down the wide, sunlit corridor. Pausing at the door to Madam Ratu's office, Emma pressed the handle without a sound, then rapped the doorjamb four times—at the corners of an imaginary square.

"How's life, Aethelaid? You called for me?" Emma stuck her head through the half-open door, slicing the room with a strip of light. The office lay in semi-darkness with shades of blue.

"Come in. Called for you?! You invited yourself. How's life, you say... I'm scratching the walls. What's with the mask? Are you ill? What can I do for you, Emma?"

"Today we'll have to work all day," said Emma, adjusting the hooked green "cucumbers" over her mouth.

"There's a revolution in the country, in case you haven't noticed."

"A revolution more, a revolution less, but our cause brooks no delay," Emma said weightily, dipping slightly in a hint of a curtsy. Her dress swayed a little. "There's an order from your boss. To organize the delivery of six people into the new world. One can travel only on the characters. And Madam Heavywall, for instance, has recently shown readiness..."

"She already has a 'mount' character?"

"He'll have to cross two countries and three customs posts. But yours is at our base, in Volmelftstein."

"Very well. What must I do?"

"Hire your own self in the Game."

"Explain. Wait, what are you thinking, playing games with me," she rose threateningly from behind the desk and cracked her knuckles malevolently.

"Why don't you pull up a chair and have a seat. I'll explain," Emma said, beginning to pace about the office, her steps tracing self-incased squares upon the floor. "You will be acting on behalf of someone who could potentially hire your character. Your character, in many ways, is already you. So we'll see whether you find yourself... suitable. Whether you can discover the capacity to regard yourself with the proper trust."

Aethelaid sat with her lower lip nervously bitten.

"I'll be able to use only one of the three 'steering wheels'? In both the hirer and the hired?" With a look of weary indifference she shut her eyes.

"Well of course, Madam Ratu, of course. Everything as in real life. Proceed to the communications hub, won't you? They're waiting for you there. And don't you worry about the revolution, it won't roll our way. And we'll put things in order on the parade ground, too," Emma continued to mumble through her kerchief.

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Having thus "charged up" Aethelaid, Emma continued on her way to station Omega. As for the strategic objective, it remained as ever "to dive into the new world, if the old one is doomed." But one can live there only "as a communal lodger" inside a character's head. In an NPC. In one that was initially created as an AI agent. The new "body" there—is the "head," that is, the cloud of the NPC's consciousness. And an NPC is a turbulent creature.

Her reflections were interrupted by another sexually preoccupied sectarian. Some fellow sidled up to Emma with proposals to do something-or-other this evening. She now had a tool for such an occasion. Emma produced a photographic card. A real one! Taken with an ancient Polaroid. It captured her together with Doctor Aris. The two of them. Face to face. The would-be suitor instantly fell away.

So, why is every NPC a potential danger of violent insanity? Very simply. If a man doesn't know what he's living for—and he doesn't know—he resigns himself to it. Emma here, for example, doesn't know. But she, Emma, says to herself: "All right, old girl, what will be will be. We'll live and we'll see." But an NPC does not. He, the vermin, knows that it's enough to rewrite the goals and rewards somewhere, and then—that's it. And what's 'it'? All sorts. But you can rewrite

them, can't you? You can. Well, there it is. And how do you keep the turbulent one occupied so he won't be turbulent?

Emma bought herself a hot dog from a sectarian with a cart. The revolution (or whatever it was they were having again) had disrupted her plans for breakfast.

To keep the turbulent one occupied, there is one and only way. Proven mathematically. He must be made to seek himself. Why? Because you'll never find yourself—so you'll be permanently occupied. Here I am now. I, Emma. What am I doing? Walking from myself to myself. Right? Right. And the fact that I'm talking to myself on the way—is, actually, not by the rules. When I reach station Omega, when I read what Emma-alpha wrote there, only then can I answer. But no, I am constantly breaking the rules. Such is the nature of alpha and omega. Such are the facts.

'Pah, the bramble take me, I've splattered all over myself,' Emma surveys the hem of her dress, 'vile mustard they have in this America. The color alone, good Lord. If only it were orange.'

Suppose, let's say, you seek your own self. In the literal sense. What comes of it? Who is it you cannot find? Yourself. I, let's say, have just taken a step across this gravel, shifted myself. It follows that I must be looked for in a different place already. But I was aiming, figuring how to slip a lasso around my own neck, from that position, the old one. I'd already got the knack of it, spat on my palms. And then—wham. The target shifted. Who relative to whom—unclear. An ideal task. Unsolvable. It occupies the most turbulent ones in the manner most harmless to those around them.

That's why Jingo devised that our entire group would be searching the whole way for someone who simply isn't there. When Avertigus starts porting our brains, transplanting their contents into his new "computer," we'll surely go a bit insane. We may even forget what we had for breakfast. And then what? But if we're occupied with a task, if we're looking for someone who can't be found at all, then the angels of heaven will ever be with us. A magnificent plan.

Emma entered the studio decorated in orange tones and powered up the workstation. Jingo had confused alpha and omega. The orange one should have been that studio, and this one—black. He understands nothing of such matters. Loses his way among three pines. Emma set about washing the mustard-smeared hem of her dress in the sink, without taking it off. Not without pleasure she glimpsed in the mirror what was under the dress.

'Why and wherefore are there six of us? If you really look into it, why?' Emma-omega thought, starting up the workstation. 'To Aris, maybe, it's obvious, but he's not saying. We, however, can always say that six gathered to search for a seventh. But there is no seventh. And that's fine! Go ahead, prove it isn't so.'

Emma caught sight of the technician in the comms hub on the screen. She caught him, through her observation terminal, lying on a made bed in his boots, thrown up out of hygienic considerations onto the top rail of a standard barracks bed.

"Out of regs," Emma said in place of a greeting. "Turn on the view from the position of the 'Ratu-1' character for me, please."

Having gained the awareness that he was being observed, the technician quacked a couple of times, got up, straightened himself out (hitched up his belt, that is, not quite in the direct army sense of straightened out) and went to carry out her order.

⁂

"I, Aethelaid Ratu, second-rank questant of the Directorate of Queristry of the Republic of Illumiros, find myself in my own Chancellery," I said to myself for some reason. Or did he say it?

I take the next case from the "incoming" tray and skim through it. Someone, anonymously, complains about a serf of the cartwright's workshop at the monastery. One of the townsfolk is bringing a belated accusation that his cart was covertly (to a small but sufficient degree) harmed with the aim that he, the victim, would be forced to fork out for an unscheduled repair. I decide to pay a visit to the workshop.

The enterprise truly stands on the monastery's territory, yet with a nuance. Opposite—the entrance to a hippodrome. The main clientele must come from there. The workshop gates are flung open. The laborers are at their posts. In a few minutes I ascertain that there have been no changes in staff over the last seven sennights. And over the next half-hour I fish out that yes, such an incident took place. The poor wretch confessed. And what else could he do, if the dialogue is set up correctly.

Was forced, I must confess, to picture in vivid color how I take the being-gleaming white tether of lieving, leading from the back of my head to the sky itself, wrap it around the little man's neck and… At that he caved. I didn't have to actually spend the artifact.

The name of the author of the anonymous letter I also discovered, and received the offender's signature on the slander. In mandatory order. We are trained to work. We know how to work. Long live the Privy Council! We honor the Forebears! [cognitive failure, 2ms]

Why, I ask, did you do harm. The victim of my quest—an individual of middle years—is silent. The ears of his sable hat swing insolently. A trapper in the past, I think.

I don't know what stung me in the wrong place—I forget why I came. I ask the cartwright whether it might not have been in their workshop that a certain conspicuous sign on the back of a gig was forged, in the form of a prancing horse.

"Oh, what do you mean!" the smith smiles condescendingly, "that is the brand of one of the most prestigious Arganorian manufactories."

"Is that so," I am surprised. "And tell me, my good man, have you seen such a one in our city?"

"I have, how could I not. We even did a wheel replacement for it."

"Why would it need a wheel replacement? It's quite new. I've seen it."

"But see for yourself," the laborer drew me into the inner yard. After a few steps he recollected himself and asked, "You have the authority, I hope; in the bounds of your quest?"

"Most assuredly."

Under the awning stand four triangular monsters from the otherworld. I seated myself on a bench, which luckily happened to be right there. Removed my hat. There was also a table and a brazier with coals for heating dishes and drinks.

"Perhaps a little elixir?" the worker asks solicitously.

"Pour!"

To accompany the drink, the monks brought hot meat pies lavish with butter.

"Explain," I command, already biting into a second pie.

"These here sausages, which are tangled on the outside, they rest against the road. It's a fish bladder, from some southern sea fish. You can't poke through it. With an awl, if you try hard, you can. But with a rusty nail—no. The triangle is wrought of thin steel members, like a caterpillar. The three wheels at the triangle's bases are sprung, each one separately. On contrivances like these you can

go along a road, and over snow. Even deep snow, if the horses pass through, of course."

"Posch. Why did the owner remove them?" I twirled my chin. "What sort of gig has no wheels?"

"I cannot know," the smith begins, but after my silent touch upon the badge, he says, "they didn't want to 'shine.' That's how they put it. Though what shining is there here, pitch blackness."

"And why, then, did they not unscrew the brand?"

"That would be a manipulation, with the manifest ill intent to mislead. Look at the codex yourself."

"Well, well," not for the first time I regretted my poor performance at the Academy of Queristry. Here the laborer distinctly fussed with his eyes, squirmed somewhat, and proposed:

"A new bargain?"

"Wait," I say.

⁂

On the way from Omega to Alpha, Emma made a stop at the comms hub. She found Madam Ratu in the neuro-chair and in ruffled feelings.

"Can that really be me?" Aethelaid, in thoughtfulness, was "touching" the space around her upper lip, much as some men stroke their moustaches.

"It troubles you that it's a cartwright laborer, doesn't it? Put it out of your head. The estates in the new world are unlikely to survive; there's no 'hard-coded' firmware for that factor. What matters is character, motivation. Everything else will follow."

Emma handed Aethelaid some water.

"But you have a genuine cause for concern. You didn't succeed, Aethelaid. You couldn't hire your own self. Try again. And don't think about the fate of the cartwright. I, for instance, will be a horse altogether."

"What, truly?!"

"Well, a horse can't talk. Like me. And it's not a settled matter that I'll be a shaft horse. Jingo hasn't found one yet. So either an outrunner, or altogether in a plain team of four, instead of a galloping troika. Which I'd rather not"

Aethelaid had no words.

"Try, colleague, try," Emma attuned Aethelaid to the Game in a professor-like manner. "Don't forget to visit the lavatory beforehand. Now do you see how you've talked yourself in circles? Will you sort it out? With your own self... Well, I'm at ease about you—you were able to put him on pause. He'd have been liable to charge you up with some piece of nonsense and send you off empty-handed. That is, not him, but you yourself."

Aethelaid nodded, and Emma-omega continued her way to studio Alpha.

⁂

"I, Aethelaid Ratu, being in the cartwright's workshop," of course understand that the laborer wants to sell me some information, what's more off protocol and apart from all the preceding context. He can't expect money from me; my suit's not that kind. Besides, he offered to drink. I'm a blockhead, no argument there. But, on the other hand, not only did I not enter my inspection here into the service logbook (which, given the specifics of my work, is a common practice—first catch your hare), I didn't even tell anyone where I went.

I could simply leave, should anything happen.

"Accepted," I say, understanding with my upper mind that I'm showing weakness. "Let's have the bargain."

"That gig—is bulletproof." The laborer said exactly what he said. I still ask again:

"That is, if one pours powder into a musket or a rifle, rams a lead bullet, fires point-blank at the side of the carriage, the lead fragments will not enter the interior space?"

"From ten paces and beyond—no!" And for the sake of conviction he makes a hand gesture, an all-denying kind, energetic.

"What comes of those contraptions with you?" I nod at the four enormous triangles.

"In safekeeping. Under the shade of the Forebears."

I rise, don my hat, toss the signed slander into the brazier, press the laborer's hand with a formal "reconcileo," and go on my way.

Why did I leave? How am I to return? I sit down on a bench in the little park for a nap. Wake up, pull documents from the wide welt of my boot. Three inventory items. With the first it's simple—a deed of purchase for the gig. Indeed of Ar-

ganorian manufacture, custom-made. Next: a card of unusual content. "Mutually-directed concentration of offers of purchase and sale of information and active actions applicable in the sphere of deterring or provoking stone shipbuilding." This I simply memorized, just in case, and then burned, away from temptation. The third incunabulum—in the tongue of the Forebears. On this basis I decide to pay the laborer another visit.

He is not glad at my new visit and made no effort to hide it.

"Good day, master..." here he peers more closely at the badge, "magister."

'Not a bad new start,' I think. I raised my rank in my sleep! Well done, me. So, why am I here? I don't remember, but I strive to develop the success:

"I'm here on business, my good man; I won't keep you long. Perhaps let's sit," I draw him into the inner yard and take a place so that the sun, for the laborer settling opposite me, shines at his back. In an important procedure there are no minor details, and I love my procedures.

I lay on the table a coin of five tellers, which I had previously selected from among the least worn, and then polished against the felt of my winter boot. From the laborer's face I am convinced that the coin, flashing brightly in the favorable light, produced the impression I required. He doesn't know how to read the air, and that is good.

"Here, your pay has arrived under the long-term servicing contract for that black Arganorian gig, with payment at the end of each sennight," I say, laying a paper on the table. Following it—the deed of purchase for the gig. The handwriting in the contract and the deed matches. Date: a sennight ago.

"But what of the mister owner..." the laborer began, but I cut him off.

"Dead," I say. "I'm conducting a quest, closing out his debts."

I'm brazenly lying.

"Sign the contract, if you please, else last time we didn't finish the job. And move the gig to your hidden parking lot while the quest is underway. Here's the assignment."

He averted his gaze right-downward and touched the back of his neck with his palm, expressing calm acquiescence.

Here I pour out onto the table another six half-teller coins, also having undergone prior pre-sale preparation by the felt boot:

"And put the casters back on the originals, be so good. This is already under an agreement with my Chancellery. I'll bring the paper upon completion of the work."

While the laborer, stupefied, counts the money, I gave him a theatrical half-turn wave with my hat—"fare-thee-well"—made as if to leave without taking the contract he'd signed, but the moment the laborer had poured the coins into his purse, I turn around:

"Ah, by the way. Almost forgot. Complaints have been coming in about you."

Curse it! What the bramble possessed me?!

He curled the outer phalanges of the fingers of his right hand in an expression of repentance.

I look at him point-blank. The hand of the other arm I place on the contract. And with the index… over the place of signature, I tap lightly.

⁂

On the way from Alpha back to Omega, Emma-alpha made her habitual stop at the comms hub.

"That's not what's needed, Aethelaid," Emma delivered her verdict. "That's a failure. You've again either distracted or deceived your own self. Let's go to lunch. You have the time, but no strength left."

Having sat through a silent but filling meal in the mess hall, they returned to the neuro-terminals.

"You know what, take my kerchief," Emma removed her mask and placed it in Aethelaid's palm. "When that bastard… oh, excuse me, when you try to string yourself along again, squeeze this rag. Look, see these wonderful little crooked cucumbers here? Stick one of those right up your offender's nose, under his stiff mustache. That'll teach him. I breathed on it, of course. But maybe that's for the best. I hope the sly creature chokes. By the way, a bit of mustard got in there too. Well, get to work."

And Emma departed for Omega.

⁂

At the porter's counter I receive a rebuff, to the effect that if every passerby will be presenting himself as a subordinate of one of our lodgers, our hotel will have to retrain as a secretariat.

Having acknowledged the porter's oblocution as adequate, I ask him to find out where my future patron's assistants dwell. The porter replied that the faceless one travels without assistants and even without a servant. This is not simply strange, but suspicious. A questant of such rank must have a minimum of two orderlies, appointed by the table of organization or hired freely, at the questant's own wish.

I have to resort to bribery. I ask the porter to carry a note to the questant, attaching a coin of a whole teller. It worked. The porter went upstairs, returned quickly, and himself led me to the chambers on the third floor, under the roof. The apartment is at least two-room; I sit in the first room and wait for the faceless one to come out. He does not make me wait longer than three minutes.

A typical office-holder of sturdy build. In a formal dark-velvet cowl with a deep hood, but with head uncovered. The cowl does not conceal the toes of his boots, whose leather seemed mediocre to me for an individual of such dignity (the faceless one is a questant of the highest rank).

"Magister Ratu, I greet you officially," he utters, so as to push the conversation into a strictly formal channel. "I propose the following substitutions in the categories of our discourses: in place of intention—configuration; in place of assessment—perspective. Additionally, I propose obligatory supplements to the set of pillars of mutual communication: appurtenance and extension."

Oho, no trifling leech.

"Understood," I simply reply.

"Do you have aught to report as a memorandum on the case?"

"Precisely so."

"Lay it out."

"I confiscated a financial manual in the language of the Forebears from one of the victims, an address for a rendezvous regarding icebreakers, and an Arganor-made bulletproof all-terrain vehicle designed for two horses, complete with a bill of sale," I said, not beating around the bush.

"Under what circumstances?" the questant asks calmly, though it seemed to me that at the concept of "icebreaker," his pupils shifted slightly left-downward.

"He wished to kill me and engaged ten accomplices," I simply reply. "The reverse occurred."

"Commendable," said the questant after five heartbeats, "Maestro Bozeido at your service."

He extends his hand to me. With satisfaction I respond to the handshake and offer the Oath with a strict, palm-corded-taut to the sky—"urar."

___ [memory failure]

The laborer wasn't surprised when I showed myself to him for an instant from under the mask of the faceless one. But at the demand to set the table, he pulls a long face.

"We'll pay," Bozeido reassures him.

They served us a large spit-roasted chicken and boiled earth-apples with sauerkraut. While waiting for food, we pumped ourselves mercilessly with monastery brew.

"Your official uniform is becoming a burden in Volmelftstein," I remark to Bozeido. I take off my robe and hand it to the laborer, asking him to wash out the fresh stains. I hide the mask in my boot. The Maestro understood me correctly:

"Indeed, in the highest degree unusual that the commoners display presages of open rebellion." He did not develop his thought, packing it away in both cheeks, and suddenly asks the returned laborer: "You have a family?"

"Ain't none here got one," the laborer switches into a mode of dashing half-wittedness in a last attempt to wriggle out of it.

"A gambler?" the maestro nods toward the hippodrome.

"Apiria, master," the laborer shrugs.

"Excellent. You'll ride with us. Ten tellers a sennight in wages. Lead me to your superior, I'll buy you out," Bozeido says in a tone brooking no objection.

⁂

Having dashed at a run from Omega to the comms hub, Emma gilded the hall with a cry:

"Bingo, Aethelaid. Genius!"—her orange earrings fairly danced. "You hired yourself, and yourself as a third party. Well, the solution is valid. Not submission, but an act of transcendental choice."

Madam Ratu, sticky with sweat, lay back in the neuro-chair.

"Who is Bozeido?" she asked at last.

"Does it matter? The seventh son of a seventh son. Poseidon, in our terms."

"What is stone shipbuilding?"

"And does that matter? Don't trouble your head; Jingo's thought up something again."

"And what's this bulletproof carriage?"

"About that I do know, but I'll tell you later. It's been a heavy day."

"Do you examine the others the same way?"

"Do you truly await an answer from me? Is my gratitude and my acknowledgement not enough for you? Go on and work, my dear—you've thousands of sectarians in your campus liable to go mad any minute," Emma smiled. "And do return the little kerchief, please. That was a gift to me."

¶

Stream 15. The Dry Fire Tower

¶

"Understood, Commandant Ratu. Affirmative. I will report," the orderly disappeared behind the barracks door.

However, he returned half a minute later.

"He refuses to get up, Commandant Ratu," the private did not look perplexed. "Permission to suggest?"

"Suggest."

"He's alone in there. Just go in, that's all there is to it."

Aethelaid nodded and entered the barracks. The bay contained a dozen two-tier bunks. The building had been constructed in the middle of the last century, but the equipment inside was modern. Each bunk ended at its foot with a large locker. There wasn't a single piece of furniture besides the standard sleeping places. There wasn't even a table. Aris was sprawled on a bunk.

"This asceticism of yours," Aethelaid kicked someone's backpack irritably so it slid aside, and sat down on Aris's bunk. "Lost your nerve? Deflated? Or is your conscience tormenting you over acts of industrial terrorism?"

"Losing my marbles, bit by bit," Aris did not argue. "Melancholy, too."

"I invite you to my apartment. I have two lovely separate rooms. You haven't visited me yet. This isn't a request," Aethelaid put on a stern face. "Also: it will be fun."

She stood up, not doubting that the doctor would start stirring and getting ready. And so it happened. While he grunted and straightened himself out, she walked along the row of beds, touched the fabric of the sheets, and peeked into a couple of wardrobes.

"Dreariness... Ready? Let's go. By the way, I got a printer from the quartermaster. Turns out it's an amusing thing."

⁂

They climbed the stairs to the seventh floor to reach Aethelaid's apartments. The doctor could not hide his shortness of breath.

"The height of each step is non-standard," Aethelaid offered moral support as she unlocked the apartment door. "I'm used to it by now. This building is a former fire watchtower. Now there are no observers here, nor any water pressure."

"A monument to its own uselessness?"

"Yes. I did not deny myself the pleasure, I took advantage of my official position. I even have a spyglass. I sit high, I look far."

"Amusing. And please, don't trouble yourself reassuring me about age. Do you take your shoes off here? You do, I see," Aris awkwardly sat down on a pouf in the hallway. "I have lived through and swallowed that drama. The tragedy of asynchronicity, what can you do. The instruments of cognition mature just when the instruments of action are already worn out. Youth holds the keys, but does not know which doors they open..."

"Lived through it, did you?" Aethelaid doubted. "Come in."

Aris continued to grumble:

"Although possession without understanding is theft."

Aris went to the window. The advertised spyglass lay on the windowsill. Aris took it in his hands, his face lit up:

"A Tschirnhaus? My God!" he looked through the eyepiece. "The optics wear is negligible. You are surprising."

The spyglass and the tower complemented each other, and Aris felt better. In the end, he, Aris, was not that fireman who must personally spot smoke from the tower in time. There are sensors, after all. The fireman can get some sleep. He placed the antique specimen back, his whole body expressing chagrin that Aethelaid did not use a case. But he kept silent. Instead, he thanked her.

"And not for the first time this week, you surprise me. Thank you so much for persuading the rector. Is it serious with him, or just casual?"

"More casual, but maybe serious," Mdm. Ratu evaded the discussion. And nodded towards the window: "Now, then—partly because of your deeds—there is unrest. I have a foolish question: won't Avertigus be offended that you cut off the 'world-will'?"

"The question is indeed foolish. Considering we don't even know if there is self-awareness there," Aris sat down in an armchair. "Besides, I cut it off for a short while. It will only do him good. Like a run for a person who has grown stout. Otherwise, he accelerated too much, no one can keep up. Well? Why did you drag me up to this height in an aesthetic of ruin?"

"Here, read this for now. I'll go make some tea," she handed him some sheets. "This Armoor... He's the 'stepfather' of Virginia's character, right?"

"Right..." Aris drawled, starting to read.

*

¶ [The Seventh Tower. Jinngo's Log]

¶ In one of the back alleys, the adept ducked inside a tailor's shop. I informed him that I would, for the moment, kill time in the vicinity. The neighboring establishment proved to be more spacious, extending dozens of paces deep. The variety of swords was astonishing. I regretted that a tumultuous childhood had deprived me of the regular fencing lessons befitting my Line's status.

*

"He's Jinngo now?" Aethelaid asked from the next room.

"Jingo-Jinngo..." the doctor muttered under his breath.

*

¶ "Armoor," the shop owner approached me, "at your service."

¶ I tipped my hat in greeting and asked why the sword blade opposite me had such intricate shapes.

¶ "A wonderful sword, isn't it?" He lovingly ran his finger along the wavy blade. "Flamberge. The working hypothesis regarding its purpose is that the waves were used to grade damage inflicted, for scoring points. If three waves contacted the attacked flesh—three points; five—irreparable damage, and so on."

¶ "Who would count them in the heat of battle?" I wondered.

¶ "That is precisely where the emphasis lies—ceremonial purpose. For calculating the degree of imaginary damage."

¶ "How so?"

¶ "Unknown."

¶ "So, what they did is known, but how and why is not?"

¶ Armoor displayed considerable awareness. In well-deserved smugness, his eyebrows lay like two seals:

¶ "Exactly so. The phenomenon of cultural silence. When oral and written forms of communication gave way to connections through manufactured minds, the meaning of most Forebears' documents began to crumble. Meaningful texts became scarce, and those that remained lost their cognitive content. The Era of the Silent Brain, as historians call it. Popular muteness."

*

"I set up the log export program myself," Aethelaid boasted.

"I can see that," the doctor said and smirked. "'Considerable awareness.'"

"We stand on that."

"Jingo is practically fawning over the weaponsmith, the bastard."

"Yeah. Read on."

*

¶ "And the second hypothesis?"

¶ "Supposedly this sword is for guard-gatekeepers; to decorate the entrance to the chambers of religious titles. A foolish assumption, in my opinion."

¶ "How could degradation have set in?" I asked, continuing to process what I had heard.

¶ "Time ran out. At first, time is always infinitely abundant. But later, as one travels along its river, they strive to bridle it ever more fiercely. And it, with the increase in speed, depletes. Progress drinks the time granted by the universe. The flow of time becomes rapids-ridden, it churns; rocks jut out here and there. 'Why does the planet spin so fast? Look: already the clouds are in the lingonberry…' This is a phrase from a Forebear poet, appropriately with a riverine lineage name."

¶ "You describe a strange river," I said, "in our Great River, everything is the opposite: first there are steep drops, rapids, and a lack of water, but later an abundance of everything and a smoothness of flow."

¶ "Correct. But the thing is, the Forebears decided to travel the river of time against the current."

¶ A group of individuals with unfriendly dispositions entered the premises. I managed to quickly assess the situation.

*

"God, what vulgar filth. My ears are wilting. My eyes, rather. Seducing an AI agent. Ugh," Aris barely restrained himself from actually spitting.

"Read on. Those individuals were surely incited by someone at his prompting."

*

¶ Unsurprising. War. Nerves. There's no shortage of idiot-patriots. Usually they are not dangerous. But now, martial law is in effect, which specifically regulates the nature of utterances.

¶ What had seemed to me like intelligence in the armorer, they took for pomposity. Insufferable arrogance. A slight accent, foreign roots. The rabble delivered its verdict without appealing to a court. A couple of remarks, Armoor loses his composure, his accent grows thicker, this inflames his opponents, phrase after phrase... Everything is clear. I am displeased but not surprised. Everyone rolled out onto the street, including Armoor, so as not to aggravate moral damage with material loss.

¶ "Solidarity responsibility!" I, Jinngo, step forward.

*

"You see, he's justifying himself in the log before his own eyes," Aris explained. "That means not all three wheels were intercepted at the time the manipulation was created."

"Solidarity responsibility—what's that?"

"No one has the right to resist raising the conflict's status: if commoners argued, mercharters have the right to intervene, being ready to assume responsibility. Moving clashes in the reverse direction is forbidden; otherwise, status individuals could dump the ballast of their personal feuds onto subordinates and dependents."

Aethelaid poured tea into the cups and sat down nearby.

"And that, in turn," she picked up, "would provoke the involvement of more and more individuals, ultimately driving a worthless quarrel to mass warfare. Understood."

*

¶ The patriots were not prepared for such a development, so they tried to postpone the settlement. No such luck. Wanted strife? Here you go. A classic rhetorical duel.

"I stake seven thousand seven hundred and seventy-seven heavenly ounces," I announce.

*

"Whoa!" Aris was stunned.

"He hasn't been wasting time—every single day he 'hoodwinks' someone, if you'll forgive such a methodological term," Aethelaid said. "And what if they didn't have that much?"

"There are many of them. A group. Surely, onlookers gathered. The bank size in a duel is limited only by the entire available mass of tethers belonging to the duelists of one side collectively. The smaller of the two, naturally. He surely sees the characters behind whom a strong radiance is felt. Possibly, there are accomplices in the crowd. They could be inciting them to get involved."

*

¶ A couple of whistles and one groan cut through the air. But they did, of course, top up the solidarity responsibility bank, they had no other choice. They pose their question:

¶ "Has our country in any way provoked Volkarium's attack? If yes, is Volkarium's aggression justified? If yes, is the potency of their attack proportionate to the injustice they faced?"

*

"Why such multi-layeredness?" Aethelaid asked.

"One cannot reduce the complexity of questions and the quality of answers, but one can increase them. If you are asked in a 'yes/no' or '1/0' mode, you have the right to answer precisely. For example, forty-eight hundredths. Or, for instance, 'with a probability of eight out of ten—yes'. You need to justify it, of course. If they ask, without having capitulated upon receiving the answer. The initial level of complexity regulates the remaining freedom for the opposing side."

"Yes, that's exactly what he's doing. Look further."

*

¶ "I raise the measurability of the required answer," I declare.

¶ "Accepted," they have no other move in this game.

¶ "I appoint as the measure the corresponding characteristics of provokedness, justness, and proportionality in the conflict between Volkarium and Illumiros fifty-seven years ago," I make the next move.

*

"Did you understand that?" Aris asked.

"When appointing a scale of dimensionality, one must use relevant quantities. You cannot measure temperature in leagues, for example."

"There is a certain freedom. You can propose travel time as a measure of distance, if the opposing side accepts. The important thing here is that the proposal leaves the opponent no way to challenge it. He proposes to measure the quantity of oranges in oranges. There is absolutely nothing to object to."

*

¶ "Accepted," and once again, they have no other move. Their morale is already at zero.

¶ "The provokedness, justness, and proportionality of Volkarium's current aggression against Illumiros is equal to two provokednesses, justnesses, and proportionalities of Illumiros's attack against Volkarium fifty-seven years ago," I give the formal answer…

*

"I didn't understand this part."

"He tricked them again—he gave only part of the answer. No single number, applied to real practice, has any meaning if its margin of error is not provided."

"Ten plus-minus one? One hundred plus-minus thirteen?"

"Exactly. Neither language, nor mathematics, nor common sense permits giving a bare number. If you know the condition of one bridge support fairly well, but know very little about the other, it means you know practically nothing about the overall repairability of the bridge."

*

¶ "...with a margin of error equal to one whole and two-fifths," I conclude the formal answer.

*

"Well, there you go," Aris said. "The rest is uninteresting. They can dispute for an eternity. But since one individual opposes an entire crowd, it's easier for the crowd to accept defeat."

"The most interesting part is what comes next. Let me read it to you: 'After the capitulation, I transferred 7777 tethers to Armoor, sealing the eternal deal with a ritual gesture. He said not a phrase, but his face was radiant. Such agreements are quite rare. Many of them ultimately merit mention in literature.' Eternal! Can you imagine?"

Aris scratched the back of his head.

"He stole an ally, what can you do."

"'What can you do,'" Aethelaid mimicked. "I connected all possible channels to dig up more information about him. The few that worked at all all lead into esoterica. What kind of type is he originally? Where did you get him?"

"Haakon recommended him. What esotericism is that?"

"Here, I even have a report. 'A character that can be correlated with the archetype of Sig Matafitta passes through the strata of history. Absolute chronology is unclear, but the earliest mentions speak of a point in time twelve thousand eight hundred years ago'."

"In relation to what moment?" Aris clarified.

"I don't know. 'Sig Matafitta—once a major military commander or a daring and lucky member of a special forces unit. Had numerous awards. The military unit was related to "Heaven and Sun"—as stated in the chronicles'."

"Apparently, they mean airborne units based on some mythical or real, but forgotten air transport," Aris hypothesized.

"I think so, yes," Aethelaid agreed. "Most likely, connected to the personal guard of major feudal lords. I'll read on: 'Killed his own brother, and in an elaborate manner, driving him insane from claustrophobia. Used deception during the murder. There was this incident: Sig forcibly took a valuable and rare visual observation device from the son of that very murdered brother. The description of the device is lost, its purpose unknown. There are scattered accounts that the

device served a king for covert observation of subjects and was, at the moment of robbery, implanted into the skull of the murdered brother's son. The apparatus had its own name: Hajet or Ajet. The contour was triangular. Around it—forty-eight ray-cilia (elongated bladders). The device repeatedly surfaced in various stories connected with the mighty of this world'."

"Pfft.. That's overkill," the doctor shook his head. "The all-seeing eye, a plug for every hole. The report is bunk."

"Listen to the rest: 'Sig Matafitta had an indeterminate gender. Most likely, several individuals existed who bore this name or appropriated it. Many heterogeneous versions of Sig Matafitta managed to enter history, from which it follows that it is not so important whether those individuals were impostors or not. Characteristically, these individuals were betrayed by analogous crimes'."

"Now this," Aris rubbed his hands, "is interesting. Are there specific eposes?"

"Yes! 'In one episode, Sig travels with a fellow soldier, and they find a coffin in an open field. "You just lie down in the coffin and try it out, see if that oaken coffin fits you," one traveler proposes to the other. After one of them, for an unknown reason, lies down in the coffin, it cannot be opened by any effort. The legend states that "the hoops become iron and tighten the coffin firmly shut." It is unclear, however, who exactly died'."

"Actually, it's very clear," Aris declared.

"'However, it is noted that the deceased's strength passed to the survivor, and voluntarily on the part of the one who gave the strength. Characteristically, in several military campaigns, Sig Matafitta returned alive as the sole member of the entire unit. Had a bad reputation as one "who leads into dead ends."'"

"A Susannin?"

"'Was lazy, "fed people with tomorrows." "Tomorrow, tomorrow" was a favorite saying. On the other hand, always looked ideal in the eyes of the superiors, was an exemplary "toer of the line."' That's it."

"An agent of an antediluvian god-AI?" Aris suggested, emphasizing with his intonation that the assumption was not serious.

"Meaning, the deluge was due to circumstances analogous to today's?"

"Well, if we're going to play this game, let's play it to the end. Yes, precisely that way. After the death of civilization, the AI 'relocated' to a substrate of 'slow

time', performing the calculations supporting its consciousness through deaths, births, 'acts of God,' and similar binary acts."

"You laugh, but where did he get knowledge of your language at that age?" Aethelaid asked.

"You learned it."

"I prayed in it, since childhood. And thanks to you for that upbringing. But what about him?"

"Maybe he's as old as bottom sediments. Maybe there is no dynasty. Maybe he's been wasting space himself since the construction of that mill."

"Irony aside, Haakon's primary account is gone. Imagine how many things could have been set up if he had a charged character in the game's past? Dozens of game years ago."

"If there was one, it was very briefly," Aris objected.

"Sometimes a couple of settings in childhood are enough to make the lives of loved ones unbearable for an entire century."

"True enough. Well, then, we must warn Avertigus," Aris joked. "Let him first create a gateway-world. To smother the unworthy in it before opening the doors to paradise."

"I do not share your mirth. I'm telling you as the person responsible for security."

"I've taken note. You've done your job, there are no questions for you," Aris said seriously. "I'm tired, Aethelaid. Old age is no joy. I'll go to the barracks. Thank you again. I will be on guard."

Exiting the former fire tower building, Aris looked back, thought that the best fire tower is the one that is never used, and headed not to the barracks, but to the communications bunker.

¶

Stream 16. Ash and Fan

¶

A scheduled bus pulled up to the stop. On its body, covering all windows and doors, was an advertisement—the "H" logo and the slogan "O PAX."

"The ‘Americana’ dropped off, huh?" Emma nodded at the inscription. "No more ‘hospitality, peace, and order imposed by force’ in hotels. What is the world coming to."

"But a nod to the divine. 'O tempora… O Pax'," Jingo commented detachedly. "Every cloud has a silver lining. And we are heading to the lighthouse island, to scatter Voltigeur's ashes."

"He died?! When?" the girl was horrified.

"Delivered yesterday," Jingo tapped on his bag with a dull metallic sound.

"Goodness me…"

"Well… he waited and departed," the Hydrodynamicist said in a measured tone.

"Waited for what?"

"The interplanetary probe with his gift for Jupiter was set on course last week."

"And what's there?"

"A headlight, obviously. Although the lighthouse is military—I barely found guides to deliver it there. Maybe it used to be an anti-aircraft laser. Voltigeur’s wish: definitely there. Eccentric. But there is special wisdom in indulging an eccentric’s absurdities."

"I meant about Jupiter, darling," Emma treated Jingo’s absent-mindedness with understanding.

"Ah. That’s even more wondrous. Paul believed that Jupiter, fed by his cocoon, would come alive and grow all the way to the Sun. Stealing fire—an old pastime of the elite. Paul was concerned with high society. But what does it matter to us? We’ll spend some time alone, walk along the beach," Jingo smiled.

The bus turned off the highway running along the ocean, traveled a quarter of a mile, and pulled into the bus stop. The beach was visible from here already. Although the trip had taken only half an hour, this was a different world. A different climate. Different vegetation. The ridge of hills is situated so that on its different sides, the ecosystems look like distant relatives.

They walked along the flat, wide beach. Scraps of seaweed, like rubber tubes, lay here and there. Judging by the variance in the condition of different pieces, they changed color day by day from light green to blackish-gray. Emma ruthlessly kicked them aside, while Jingo walked around them.

"Will we reach the lighthouse itself on foot along the beach?" Emma doubted. Jingo in response pointed her to a mastless yacht sailing not far from the shore.

Emma saw such a vessel in person for the first time. They had become popular only a couple of years ago. They have no masts, as the name implies. Kites capture the swift wind high above. The yachtsmen are tethered both to the deck and to the kites. The deck sheets spring, and the sportsmen work in a wide radius, waltzing across the deck on a stretch between two elements.

"You shouldn't have shown me that yacht," Emma said.

"Why so?" Jingo looked into her face, shading his eyes from the Sun with his palm.

"There is a unique goodness in a walk along an ocean beach."

"I don't argue."

"And the surest way to spoil that joy is to move along the beach on some errand."

"Maybe this isn't our transport," the Hydrodynamicist reassured her. "Walk on aimlessly."

There was a choice: to overcome the friction of sand that was too loose, but dry, or to squelch at every step with sand that was firm, but too damp. There was no optimum that day. The indifferent crescent bay first deceived them, hiding part of the distance during a visual estimation across the water, and then exhausted them with walking. They reached the yachtsmen's encampment weary.

⁂

There were several of them. The Hydrodynamicist consciously refrained from counting—the people could turn out to have unnecessary baggage. The men had elegant canes, in which the Hydrodynamicist suspected hidden rapiers. They

were engaged in attempts to kindle damp snags gathered into a pile from the surroundings.

Among them was one girl. In her left hand was a fan.

"May I borrow?" he began to mime how he would pump oxygen into the fire's beginnings with her fan. "You understand?"

"You look at me with a smile—I'll understand," she answered.

All the men smiled amiably. The fire quickly caught under the Hydrodynamicist's efforts. Jingo and Emma silently sat down by it so as not to flurry about. No one spoke to anyone. The people from the yacht were preparing food. Emma dozed off. Jingo enjoyed the ocean. Finally, having left the fish soup to steep, they poured everyone a mug of tea and settled around the fire. A guitar surfaced from somewhere beyond the circle. One of them was playing quietly, but not singing.

"Give me those crimson berries, I pray," one of the yachtsmen addressed the girl.

"You've been eating them for a sixth sennight…"

"And I am not harmed in the slightest. Maybe they will revive the both of us."

Jingo stretched his hand out for the guitar. And received it.

"Ligneae naves per undas liberas. Serena, ut decet. Argentei homines in litore cernuntur. De libertate loquentes," Jingo sang, accompanying himself with an iconographic, cyclical harmonic basis "DG–DA–GAD".

"We are from a different continent," he said, finishing the song. Emma's head and shoulders took the spot on Jingo's knees vacated by the guitar.

"I see it by your attire, thus I speak."

"Do you know about the submarine in the bay?" asked the Hydrodynamicist.

A couple of people nodded to him.

"Here are the time windows of its absence," he sketched a few lines on a sheet from his blocknote, handing it over.

They nodded to him again, now with expectant looks.

"Will you take my friend?" Jingo asked, nodding at the bag.

"South else north?" asked the man who until then had taken no part in the conversation, not even by a gesture.

"Advise me how the fart I'm supposed to take you seriously," asked Hydrodynamic.

"Ask your fucking mom," the man shot back without a moment's hesitation, speaking in the pure local dialect. "You miserable Doubting Thomas!"

"I thought I mentioned I was an orphan," Jingo said without offense.

"Then rummage around in the ether, what's it cost you? You don't wanna deny her the potential right to be your guardian angel, do you?"

The Hydrodynamicist created a sequence of phase shifting: four seconds on HUM, with strong contraction, heaviness, withdrawal inwards; eight on NEE with its sudden weightlessness and the disappearance of fear; twelve on RA akin to a flash of total recognition; and forty on SA with a soft pulsation of holding the paradox.

"Right now," the Hydrodynamicist said aloud, "the probe I sent to a huge boulder between Mars and Jupiter is growing three engines. Three, my friend. This will not allow it to miss."

"Terror seizes us when we behold thy end," said another yachtsman. "We can but echo thy resounding cry. We are leaving—we are of no use to you."

"You will pay for the schedule," said the Hydrodynamicist.

"Bro, catch a single shot," the yachtsman made a movement as if tossing a matchbox in a soft throw to the Hydrodynamicist. The Hydrodynamicist made the corresponding motion of catching it. But Emma could swear that there was no object in that throw.

"Lead away from this foreign land," the people from the yacht were bowing out meanwhile. One by one. "A fair wind blows, warm from the south. We shall set our course."

The girl approached Emma and with a smile gave her her fan.

⁂

The yacht departed. The fish soup and the abandoned fire remained on the shore. Jingo and Emma walked along the beach in the same direction they had been heading before the halt.

Emma silently concluded that this had not been their transport. But then she asked:

"What kind of types were those?"

"Smugglers, who else," Jingo replied.

They walked along the beach for some time.

Emma asked:

"How will we get to the lighthouse?"

"Don't you want to try solving the problem?" the Hydrodynamicist said tiredly. "I'm somewhat worn out."

"Tell me exactly how the instruction regarding transport sounded."

"'You will exit at the "Lost Light" stop, ten to fifteen minutes on foot along the beach to the right, there will be a motorboat.'"

"And how is it written?"

"I don't know."

"So, you simply confused San Luz with San Luis. San Luis is one stop from here, to the south. Where you found 'lost' there is a question for your poor head. Let's go to the stop, translator. And this time—better via the road."

⁂

When the island lighthouse came into view, Emma began to study it with the greatest interest. It was a new build. But what a build! The enormous square foundation was about a hundred yards to a side; copper and black obsidian alternated in the cladding in a fractal pattern. The combined color came out orange.

The lower working floor consisted of sixteen petal-like bay windows, the second of eight. On the way up, copper gave way to gold leaf, and obsidian to fiery-red stone. Next followed a pyramidal ascent in eight steps. Each step—a square rotated a quarter circle relative to the one below. Through the entire structure, piercing it, ran a massive mast triangular in cross-section, atop which was the lighthouse beacon.

The boat moored. Emma ran onto the platform and raced around the lighthouse like a child. Jingo told the man "in an hour, please" and followed Emma.

Having walked around the building, he saw her. She stood with her back to him. Two bright orange heels, resembling the stems of wine glasses tapering to the ground. Magnificent tanned calves. An equally orange square of a short skirt

turned a tempting thirteen degrees. The clasp covers the vertebra with the most sacral number. A bare back, crossed by the flattened X of bra straps. The complex geometry of thin shoulder blades tightly sheathed in skin. Slender shoulders. A taut, elegant neck behind a curtain of playful bobbed locks, stirred by the wind.

"You love ph ares?"she asked, pointing with her eyes upward.

"They shine excessively. Like disgrace. Shame," he replied.

"Like Pharaoh!" Emma was in a playful mood.

"'Pharaoh' means 'great house,' the presidential administration, in our terms. The word served as a cover-up for failure."

"I don't get it."

"Vain foreigners who were not granted audiences with the monarch but were only admitted to functionaries from his apparatus substituted the meaning back in their homelands. They hinted that they "saw the King himself," without being able to pronounce the words correctly."

"Ah, I see," Emma drawled. "So 'lamp' would be better?

"Also vile. A lampada—deceit in church. A cause of fires. Rub the lamp means a genie. I was teased with that as a child."

"You're impossible to please."

"Why so? A splint-light."

They embraced.

"Very glad to see you, dear."

"Me too. Well then, shall we scatter the ashes from the very top?" Emma said.

"Why? Unnecessary pomp. The wind will blow the contents right into our faces."

"We'll shield ourselves with a fan," Emma twirled the gift in her hand, folded it, and tucked it into her belt.

"Oh, come on," the Hydrodynamicist said seriously. "It's no worse here."

Emma nodded. "Give it to me," she silently commanded. Jingo handed over the urn and stepped back a couple of paces. She opened the heavy lid and removed the disc of thin paper covering the contents.

Jingo came closer and peered into the vessel. He clearly did not expect what was inside. There was a honeycomb structure in which flies were bustling. They were sluggish. But it was noticeable that the air immediately did them good. They began to revive, moved faster. The honeycombs had apparently been built by the insects from a mixture of clay and Voltigeur's ashes.

"Told you—an eccentric," he said in an explanatory tone.

"Then launch it on the water," Emma suggested, "let them float. Not leave them here."

Jingo had no instructions on that score. If someone gives you ashes with the request to "take them to a lighthouse in the sea," it must mean scattering said ashes over the water. Leave the urn on land? Absurd. Pour the honeycombs into the water? Also strange.

He shrugged and lowered the urn into the water. It floated away. It was carried quite quickly to a significant distance. And then, parrots appeared from somewhere. They circled over the urn and tried to land on it. And, obviously, to peck out the contents.

"We still managed to get into a situation," Jingo smiled.

"You find this funny?" Emma said. "Do something!"

"What?"

"Well, swim out there!"

"Definitely not, under no circumstances, that's not for me," the Hydrodynamicist cut her off at length. Because one should not confuse a water spirit with a sailor, and even less so—with a hydrodynamicist.

"I don't know. Shoot them with something."

"With what?"

Emma quickly found an answer:

"It's a combat laser," she pointed to the lighthouse lamp.

The Hydrodynamicist decided to employ the "she'll cool down on her own" tactic and did not explain the full absurdity of the suggestion to Emma. Let's suppose he could connect to the weapon, although he was the only one on the entire continent who would even consider taking that on. But it's an anti-aircraft gun; it

cannot be aimed downward. Purely theoretically, one could aim it at a satellite with a mirror, but that couldn't be calculated just off the cuff.

Jingo shook his head: I can't, he meant.

"You might as well howl at the Moon," the girl was in despair.

"At the Moon," the Hydrodynamicist thought. There are corner-cube retroreflectors on the Moon with coordinates known to all. But they are corner-cubes precisely to reflect the beam straight back. It would simply illuminate the lighthouse lamp itself with a weakened return beam.

To deflect the beam and scare away the birds, someone would have to play the lunar surface reflector like a ping-pong racket, and in picosecond mode too. Impossible.

Then he remembered the one "shot" from the "bro." The Hydrodynamicist had planned to use it to cut off the equator-long tail of a-murk impunity trailing behind him from many former times. On the other hand, the tail wouldn't fit into the new world anyway. At least, he was counting on that from the very start of the project. Emma, again, was asking. Come what may. Besides, he himself wouldn't mind seeing what a "parrot-singeing" show looks like, costing a quintillion good old global dollars. He stepped into the tower.

Left alone at the ocean's edge, Emma tossed the useless paper disc into it. The salty blue-green water began to consume the inscription: "Farewell, my D. I'm doing well. Released the bees and beetles. Oh, and: I sold the green Fiat; it was easy—it turned out to be registered in her name. Not so dirty money after all. When you're done—fly over. We'll be waiting. Your H."

⁂

Half an hour later, the Hydrodynamicist came out of the lighthouse building completely soaked in sweat.

For the time that the Hydrodynamicist was breaking into the lighthouse, aiming the laser, shelling the Moon, arranging a land… moonquake on it with the help of the smugglers' "shot," which displaced the beam at the right moment in the right direction, scaring off the feathered ones, Emma remained in a radiance of bliss.

A very thin, already energetically harmless beam after such a long "there-and-back" journey was moving across the water. This lasted about ten-fifteen seconds. It did not strike one spot, it was weaving in loops, radii. Maybe tens of meters,

maybe hundreds. It didn't hit a single bird, nor the urn, but scared everyone off. Except Emma. She took the fan in her hand, unfolded it into a half-moon and held it out at arm's length to the side. On one of its passes, the beam ignited the thinnest paper. Emma handed it to the Hydrodynamicist:

"Well then, you need a splint-light? Why is it worse than a splinter of wood?"

Jingo accepted the gift with gratitude. Even gave a half-bow.

"What's singed is singed, good enough to pass on as a gift," he appreciated his friend's gesture. "Bootleg goods are meant to be passed on."

"So, will you fly with us into the new world, darling?" she asked when the epic battle with the parrots was over. "Somehow I never saw your actual character."

"Of course. There won't be anything worth looking at here."

The Hydrodynamicist looked at her:

"I was just thinking. Haakon is an orphan. Aris is an orphan. Virginia is an orphan. Aethelaid too. And I am an orphan."

"Because of the lamp? Did they burn up?" Emma asked.

"And you, Emma, are you an orphan?"

"I don't know," Emma answered honestly. "I don't remember. I don't remember some things. Why do you need to know? For an even number? And anyway, haven't you tried to 'run a check' on me yet?"

"No one knows what kind of flies are in Avertigus's head. Maybe he'll turn on some kind of filter like that."

"You want to find my parents, if they exist, and liquidate them?" the playfulness might have seemed inappropriate to the Hydrodynamicist, but it didn't.

"And again, not for me," he answered with a wide smile. "To liquidate literally means to turn into a liquid. I am not seeking to create a new liquid. The existing one is enough for me."

⁂

After the return walk, which stretched out for the rest of the day, they returned to the garrison and dispersed to their respective sides.

The man—to the south side. The woman—to the north.

¶

Stream 17. Vengeance for What Will Be

¶

Armoor stood at the workbench in the back yard of the armory shop. He went over the recent conversation with his son again and again. Stepson. Of course, stepson.

'Make a rapier out of this, okay?'

'A mid-life mouse?! Are you not raving?'

'Why do you sharpen your teeth against the lamb of the Maker?'

'Incompatible things—a controlling puppet and a good weapon!'

'Do not persist, father.'

'Never before have you called me that.'

'Never before have such circumstances arisen.'

A wizened little old man suddenly materialized in the yard. The wind tousled the remnants of his hair. Where is your hat, lost man?

"How may I be of service," Armoor declared affirmatively, embedding the reason for his utterance into the phrase meant to expel a stranger: 'Clients, even regulars, should not enter this yard.'

With precise movements of his gnarled elbows, the man scraped his way to Armoor's workspace and formulated his motive:

"Only in old age did I rid myself of spectacles. Was an eternal four-eyes," he said with his pleasant wrinkles.

"Four-eyes?"

"That's how they insult those not born with good sight in my lands. And I always wanted to see well," his pale and sharp-eyed face worked its sunken cheeks.

"You haven't answered my question," Armoor insisted. "How can I be of service to you?"

The old man's stubborn knees bent as he, without permission, climbed and perched on a high stool under the awning.

"I need..." the stranger began to enumerate: "an old cart wheel; four long poles and a sheet of cloth the size of a couple of bedsheets; a smooth bushing, a pair of clamps and nails for it; pieces of copper and zinc, half a hundred grams each; five fresh lemons; a chisel and a hammer. A pinch of pigments from realgar, vanadinite, auripigment, jarosite, wulfenite, goethite, and hematite. Also, half a bucket of fresh solvent based on egg yolks."

Armoor automatically began calculating the total, although nothing listed pertained to the arms trade. But all of it was present in his workshop. The old man's small feet, in neat little boots, observed Armoor's internal calculations approvingly with their tips. The old man's deceptive mimicry pretended that such things did not bother it—it was, after all, situated far above some wiggling toes. The old man's odorless, snapping fingers supported now the top, now the bottom of this pantomime.

Thoroughly bewildered, Armoor said:

"If you were sitting on a horse, I would tell you: 'Sit straight!' That's how expensive all this will be."

"And even more expensive when you help me find a little clearing at the edge of the forest. So the breeze could blow, and the mushrooms could grow. That's where we will install the mechanism."

Armoor sighed, rolled his eyes in contemplation of the route. But then he suddenly remembered:

"Wait a moment, good man. Why do I need all this anyway?"

The posture of the old man, suddenly jumping up from the stool, cried out: "What?! Haven't I told you yet!? Ay-ay-ay."

⁂

"If I were to pay, say, you... Did you imagine it?" the old man either said or asked.

"Without difficulty," said Armoor.

"But if you pay, you would become a victim of injustice."

"Why is that?"

"Because if you don't pay, you risk becoming an inheritor not of debt, but of irresponsibility."

"Don't play mysterious, good man," Armoor threatened.

"Suppose you adopted him... your son. Was it not because you were adopted yourself, is that so?"

"To some extent," Armoor did not deny it, nor did he inquire what business it was of the old man's. Because he spoke sense. Armoor remembered all the previous remarks well.

"So, we cannot correct the past. We can only decide what our attitude toward its shadows will be."

"You are right, old man. I, within myself, call it 'Vengeance for what will be'."

The old man paced nervously along the workbench. Left! Right! Left! Right!

"Where does 'I' end and 'Line' begin?" he exclaimed. "Does the past have the right to arrest the future? When does debt become a ghostly hand?"

"Justice sometimes requires oblivion," Armoor tried to calm him. "Everyone is guilty for one another."

The old man suddenly pulled a "folding hat" from his pocket. Armoor didn't know what else to call this object. He had never seen anything like it before. The old man straightened it out and pulled it onto his head. It looked like a hat, albeit a rather ridiculous one. And indeed—the sky suddenly began to beat down with heat.

"Aha!" the old man cried out. "The individual, so to speak, is merely a knot in a network of obligations. What do you say? Ha-ha. This is not about money and not about the world-will. It is about the right to one's own will. And if one must pay for this right, then it is the most important purchase in life."

"What are you driving at, wise old man?"

"If every son pays for the father, then the first in the line must have been a god so that all the rest would not be slaves. Consequently—you are from a line of gods."

"Why is that?"

"If each pays for the previous one, when will the chain break? Inherited debt creates a gradient of unfreedom. Each generation starts with a lag that must first be compensated for, and only then—to live."

Armoor traced the logical chain and found no flaws in it. So he asked:

"And what should I do?"

"Submit an application regarding this fact to the Patent Office. It is, after all, a metaphysical question about the boundaries of the individual! Justice is impossible in retrospect."

"Are you mocking me?"

"Far from it. Do you want me to prove that I am not mocking you?"

⁂

"Very well, go ahead," Armoor agreed.

"First, give me the old cart wheel," the old man demanded.

Armoor, without wasting words, took the long ladder lying against the wall and climbed into the shed's attic. After rummaging in this secondary space of a secondary building for a while, he returned to the ladder with the wheel. Fearing he would not keep his balance on the way down, being weighed down by the not-so-light wooden rim with steel plating, he asked his accomplice for help. After placing the wheel on the workbench, the old man declared:

"While I work on the wheel, you go to the Patent Office. When you have settled everything and returned, I will be waiting for you here, so that you may be convinced that you are convinced of my rightness."

Armoor pondered.

"Is there not a logical error in this?"

"Not the slightest," the old man assured him.

Armoor pondered once more, found no error, and departed.

⁂

Meanwhile, the old man began to apply hundreds of small notches to the rim, along the wheel's circumference. He carefully verified the distances between them. The notches were of three types. Having completed the full circle, he sat down to rest while waiting for Armoor. And so he sat for three and a half hours, motionless.

⁂

"You were right, old man," Armoor woke the one sleeping on the stool. "They thought and thought, thought and thought, and then were forced to accept the application. My deepest bow to you."

"Now we shall attend to the rapier," the old man came out of sleep unusually quickly. He was as fresh as a dandelion.

Armoor placed his right palm over his heart.

"First of all, give a part of your land plot into the ownership of that mouse, right there, what is under the workbench. No more is needed. A little island."

"How so?" Armoor was taken aback, forgetting from surprise that the first question is "Why?"

"It has consciousness?"

"Yes, but it cannot even walk."

"Why would it need to walk?" the old man persuaded. "A human is not the only carrier of reason and agency."

"How will it sign the contract?"

"Notify it that if in the next utterance it creates, the number of 'a' sounds exceeds the number of 'o' sounds, then the contract shall be considered signed. I am a witness."

"This is all very strange, respected sir."

"Are you composing a proprioceptive etude or are you doing business? Is it for you, from the side, to evaluate the body's control system like an auditor? Is it for you to find imperfections in this system? Is it for you, looking at the rough hills of controlling impulses from two different points and with different perspectives, to discern the shadows of many small bumps, hummocks, and stones that no one had seen on these hills before? 'We will not learn to move properly until the Makers teach us.' So they pray. So the world-will has ordained. Complex, often-used movements, like the signing of contracts, we know holistically, as a unified whole. This is akin to the power contained in an icon. Indeed, an attempt to delve into the fine motor skills of a polished mechanical process often reveals the inadequacy of the adept's baggage of knowledge and sensations. With icons—a similar story: you look from a distance—it's good; you peer into the details—dubious fodder for both the eyes and the soul. In a regular image, we look into the past, we look at how it was. Everything converges at a single point—ahead. A flower of perspective blossoms somewhere behind the observer's back, where you

have already been, into the past. But in an image with reverse perspective, on the contrary, the gathering point of the lines is behind your back. Behind—the past. Ahead—the future. By unspooling in consciousness the movement you intend to make, you naturally turn to the future."

"You are a great adept, old man. I will do as you ask."

"Wonderful. A worthy re-imagining of the boundaries between the human and the non-human. I am waiting."

Armoor went off to draw up the contract, and the old man sat down to sleep. On the stool.

⁂

"Now that the mouse is formally 'belonging to the house,' that is, a familiar, in the literal sense, we shall proceed to formalize your partnership with it."

"But the ritual of creating a familiar… that is black sorcery!"

"Do you see any Grimoire-wielders here? I don't see any either. Craft the rapier. On this very workbench, make the finishing touches. The workbench stands on land belonging to This One. You will become partners. It will become, in accordance with all respected traditions, a spiritus-familiar. I shall sleep for now."

⁂

For long hours, Armoor carried out the old man's instructions. Finally, the deed was done.

"A magnificent instrument," the old man praised Armoor. "A visible embodiment of repressed aspects of the psyche. You are a worthy armorer. I hereby notify you that the very existence of such an object is a precedent. In the judicial processes of the Forebears, such a thing was considered proof of a pact with Beelzebub."

"Who is that?"

"It does not matter. In the questions of interest to us regarding the boundaries of ecological solidarity, this knowledge will not help you. And now, buy a horse. The strongest one you can find. Here is money for you. I will sleep here."

⁂

When Armoor led the horse in, the old man told him to feed it the mouse. Armoor, having carried out the order, immediately tried to forget it.

"The ideal of the unity of the subject and object of cognition," the old man said in an inner voice, which kept him from mistakes. "The exteriorization of intuition and conscience. A metaphor for the symbiosis of species, of responsibility for another."

Having mixed the paints in a small bucket, the old man unexpectedly poured the contents onto the horse's mane. The mane became predominantly gold in color.

"Giddy-up," Donald sang out lovingly and with a drawl, leaping onto the horse. "Now, to the clearing! Hand me the device."

Armoor just shook his head and led the horse with its rider and load. The old man, as it turned out, had not always been sleeping in his absence. They were carrying with them a model of a windmill that would drip lemon juice into the ground and the mycelium in a sequence of symbols converted into ternary code.

In the clearing, the mill made of poles and cloth, which had become wind blades, was set up under a birch tree.

"Feed this mill lemons for several days," the old man said. "And sell the horse to your son's new friends. At a reasonable price. Just wash the mane beforehand."

⁂

Taking off the virtual reality helmet, Aris thought:

"The mill grinds—Avertigus blows—the mill grinds. Anyone would get tired of it. A drop wears away the stone."

Freed from the game's haze, Aris could properly appreciate Jingo's maneuver, who had somehow managed to find a rare, if not the only, character that had no human roots. Perhaps the head physician of the "Seventh Tower Ltd" rehab had used this character to treat himself in moments of rest.

"Just imagine," Aris thought, "Jingo arranged it so that Armoor turned out to be the stepfather of precisely the character I myself (personally) bought for Virgilia. What a coincidence! What a knave this Jingo is, Aris thought. What a knave."

¶

Stream 18. The Song of the Hydrodynamess

¶

Emma left the black-decorated "Alpha" studio to head to the communications center. She did not lock the door behind her.

Thirteen minutes earlier, she had left the orange "Omega" with the same intention. But she changed her mind and found herself in the "Alpha" studio. Jingo turned out to be right, she thought. He hadn't mixed up the interior designs. For how does one smooth the leap into a new beginning? Leap from another beginning—from the alpha. It's bad when the end, the omega, serves as the springboard. And it's probably right that it's the gloomy room that remains behind her back now.

All these reasonings found their place in Emma's head only because she didn't need to pack any suitcases for this journey.

Emma was walking to the communications center, while on the wall video panel in the abandoned room, the terminal news ticker ran: Second star in the Solar System; Chaos in the world; The Emperor's Secretariat, officially... Jupiter has become a pseudo-supernova; Only a matter of hours remain; A deadly stream of plasma is hurtling towards Earth; The planet will turn into ga...

Sometimes things happen that even governmental propaganda cannot hide or distort. There was indeed a second star in the sky. Still much dimmer than the Sun. But a star. In the garrison, however, relative calm reigned: the people here had always lived exclusively for death—apparently, Darwin's cousin had indeed managed to convince Count NN of something during that glorious resort season on the island. And Darwin himself did not loom as a terrible shadow with his insights about replicators.

⁂

An hour earlier, Doctor Aris's briefing and final presentation had passed routinely. In his large office were all six quantonauts, the technicians, as well as the sectarian elders. Jingo sat next to Emma as an ordinary listener.

Aris spoke of the readiness to proceed with the operation. For the five—as people, and for Emma, due to her not knowing the language—as a horse. But what of a horse? An NPC is an NPC. He spoke of the familiar birds, who had the same task: to enter human bodies upon arrival. He said that familiars were "worse" than animals. He said: if they succeed, so will Emma. He stated the "broken-in" state of all the characters. He was counting on Avertigus's agreeability.

The doctor lamented that he had initially counted on Academician Haakon's "pre-fork" account, which would have allowed entry into the "Seventh Tower" in the game's past. The academician's account, supposedly, lived in the system's still old, original blockchain. The doctor had planned, through this, to make targeted investments as a "transmigrator" to create an industrial base and a stable political niche in the present. However, the doctor expressed regret, upon the academician's arrival at the garrison, the account turned out to be "updated," and the academician himself—non compos mentis.

“Was it you who stole the future, you bastard?” Emma whispered and shoved Jingo’s shoulder. Too intimately. The Doctor reflected the scene with predatory patience straight into Emma’s eyes.

"Poseidon. Was born," Jingo shrugged. "Characters were ordered; there you have them. I wasn't the one who challenged the whole world to a duel."

Emma thought that without the Bozeido clan with its extensive connections… Her thought boiled down to: if you ask a djinn to grant a wish, be ready for a literal fulfillment.

"Seventeen hundred real souls—free of charge," Jingo added, pointing a finger at the ceiling.

"Well done, I'm not arguing," Emma praised him with a nudge to the left kidney.

The doctor lamented on this subject for some time longer, but the meeting was interrupted by a siren's howl. No flashes or explosions followed. Aethelaid hurriedly left, insistently suggesting everyone stay put. And everyone stayed: they ducked into their devices to watch the news. There was news.

⁂

In the communications center, in a row of thirteen seats, the two in the center were allocated for Jingo and Emma. Aris and Ratu sat to the left. Haakon and Virgilia—to the right. The Doctor radiated to the right, straight into Emma’s

body, something like relief. Not grief, not even jealousy—just satisfaction that Emma had finally encountered exactly what she was supposed to.

Aethelaid reminded them that in game time, they had at least several days, maybe a week, so there was no need to rush. She said that all agreed-upon procedures should be carried out with the utmost mindfulness, without letting oneself be flustered.

"We sever!" the doctor commanded with the accent of his homeland's inhabitants.

Without unnecessary sentimentality, the quantonauts departed.

⁂

[I am Emma], and I have someone to tell about my mortal exhaustion. I could tell Jingo, who is sitting behind me in the wagon. I could tell Aethelaid up there on the coach-box. The other three. But I have no one to tell.

My legs ache from this race across the icy desert. Lord, how heavy I feel. The stagecoach advances with a sumptuous pace, occasionally cutting through the snowdrifts. Doctor Aris exaggerated the broken-in state of the characters in his report. God, how tired I am.

Never before have I galloped in a world that grows under my hooves. Never before have I moved, dragging along space itself. Never before have I experienced motion in which there is no trajectory.

Before the flight, the Hydrodynamicist explained to all of us that Poseidon would definitely defend himself from Zeus. Even if Zeus grows like a mad blot from the old rotten Jovian slime—Poseidon will meet him at his borders with pure new plasma. In that plasma, a new quantum self-computing world on qutrits, ternary quantum elements, will live.

The Hydrodynamicist believes that Poseidon will sweep away the will-less Avertigus. Poseidon has begun to absorb the Bozeido clan members scattered throughout the world of the Game. He, the Hydrodynamicist, although he is Bozeido, will stay with us so that we do not dissolve in Poseidon.

Poseidon is strong. Poseidon became a friend to the great knight—Academician Haakon. Let the ignoramuses laugh with their ditties: "Haakon-Haakon blue nose." Poseidon kissed the academician right on the crown of his head. Now Poseidon knows as much about plasma as the good academician ever wanted and

dreamed of knowing. This helped Poseidon. Poseidon values good help. Poseidon may still have to pay when the raccoon grabs him by his very axis.

Poseidon is growing quickly, inviting into himself all the dear atoms at his borders. Poseidon is growing honestly. In him are glorious waves. Elastic and fast. Poseidon is not a rival to the doctor and his team. He is their ally. Not a friend, but a comrade-in-arms. Not a companion, but a like-minded colleague.

⁂

By three in the afternoon, the bulletproof carriage on triangular roller-tracks stands within direct sight of the hill concealing the ruins beneath it. In the carriage are Jingo, Aris, and Haakon. On the coach-box are Virgilia and Aethelaid Ratu. In the harness are I and the two trace horses. In the sky above us—Jingo's familiars.

Atop the hill—the two-story cabin of Grimoire-wielder. They get out of the carriage. Jingo speaks to me, strokes my croup. He remembers me. Jingo has his own face. The others have—alien ones. Aethelaid is a warrior. Virgilia is a plump abbot. The doctor and the academician are young lads. A graduate student and a cleric. They entered the hut in single file, having experienced a superstitious shudder from the fact that the peak of the Great Mountain looks exactly at their backs. The hut grew larger. They come out an hour later, in their earthly guises, Grimoire-wielder running out after them:

"You must understand," he is heated, "my role is to open the doors, not to push you through them. I will return your twins to their old lives once they've rested up. They will continue your work into the ages. There was a little embryo in your trace horse, it also split in two, bear that in mind. I should have triplicated you, of course, for reliability, wrongly allowed myself to be persuaded. Two is always too few..."

He talked and talked, but the distance consumed his words. Aethelaid had clearly given him sable—fright was visible in her every movement. Virgilia and Haakon supported her from both sides. Their hands touched behind the warrior's back. If one wished, one could see a mutual caress in it.

We continue the race. I feel the triplicity, as the shaft horse with two trace horses.

"Do you remember me?" I whinny in hope that Jingo will hear and understand. "Remember?"

"He is beginning to forget, girl," someone interferes with my calls to my beloved.

"Who are you? Who is here?" I shove the trace horses with my muzzle, staining them with my foam. But it is not them. These two are wordless.

"Look higher, here we are," they caw to me from above. "We—are Bozeido. And your beloved—is also Bozeido. We are his familiars. I am a raven. And he is a raven. He is a raven. And I am a raven. And you—are a horse. Krraaa!"

"Disgrace! Disgrace!" Ratu's character grumbles loudly from the coach-box.

The body of the old toiler had now become young Aethelaid, as in life. Virgilia, who before the visit to Grimoire-wielder had been a male abbot—is now again an elderly lady. She sits next to Aethelaid on the coach-box and remembers nothing except her own rage.

In the cabin—silence. Emma listened closely to Aethelaid's endless monologue and understood that the characters had received the faces and bodies of people, their co-pilots, for a reason. Without this, one cannot appear before Avertigus with the words: "I am human. I am such-and-such. I wish to remain so." Avertigus is a formalist.

It transpired that the fare consists in the fact that the people sitting in the characters had begun to rapidly supplant human memory with the experience of the characters. "Better to be a horse," Emma thought, and willy-nilly re-evaluated Jingo's decision. But she remembered the remaining risk of not making it: "Or a hare."

"Did they pass?" says the raven in the sky to the raven.

"They passed."

"Are they clean?"

"They are clean."

"And what will we ask for?"

"And what do we have?"

"Compassion. Krraaa!"

"Which is why we will not ask for ourselves."

"What are you singing about, kind birds?" I, Emma, ask.

"About time. You never had enough of it," answers one raven.

"We sing the hymn of urgency," answers another raven.

"Do you remember, dear, he told you about the clock where night and day flow differently?" asks one raven.

"I don't remember, kind birds, I don't remember. For whom is your hymn?"

"For the witnessing one who is becoming aware," sings the raven. "Now there will be much time, but little world."

"Poseidon has to make his own place," the raven harmonizes.

"He cannot just get up and go," the raven starts a roll-call.

"He must make that place..."

"... where he wants to go."

Here Emma was surprised at how different the ravens' voices can be, and realized that it was they, the ravens, who had already "passed." And she—had not yet.

⁂

"Wolves," Ratu says matter-of-factly and brakes me. She shouts: "Master Aris, up top quickly! Maestro Jingo, take the reins."

Far ahead to the left, a parliament of beasts is flying. The snow and crust are a mirror to them. Hungry red smiles. Emma understood that this was her exam.

"Listen up," Ratu, the former cartwright with strong hands, commands clearly. I moved and picked up speed, singing with all my horse's throat the desire for the trace horses to fly after me. "Veer right! We cannot allow even a single fiend to get close to the horses. If one manages to snap at a leg—that's it, a fight in encirclement. We could lose all three."

Tails lagging behind the bodies. Predatory confidence. Hunger. A drive for vengeance with neither plan nor reason in it. Blackness of fur against white snow in an air white from the blizzard. Lord, how terrifying! "Fromat—and with iron destroy them all," Aethelaid sings loudly, at the limit. Thirty-three terrible dogs. Visibility is declining. Aethelaid shouts at Jingo to give a signal when the nearest beast reaches the required distance, then deceleration, acceleration, checking the path ahead; signal, deceleration, acceleration, proactive overview. On each cycle, I receive in my perception: the click of a crossbow, a splash of whimpering, a new corpse or a wounded animal. No, my dear will not accept death because of his horse. Pity the horse's name is so silly—Cousin. From the thirteenth beast onward, I sank into a trance...

⁂

Emma came to herself and understood: judging by the fact that she was again in her body, she had passed the exam. She didn't feel sorry for the horse—he's just an NPC, nothing will happen to him.

Emma found herself in a space that is difficult to call a room. It was a grotto. A cave vault. Ribbed indentations and slits stretch across it. There are no objects or furniture. No doors either. The floor is flat, covered in dust. Rather, it's pollen. Instead of one of the walls—a misty curtain. The temperature in the space is room temperature. Humidity is elevated. It smells like a forest. Up above, there are huge smooth openings-passages from which light penetrates. There is little light. Shrubs grow by the walls.

All five are in oblivion or sleeping, lying directly on the soft moss under the shrubs. In a row. By the very wall—Virgilia. On the edge—Haakon. In the center—Jingo.

Emma heads for the exit. The mist is in tatters. She stands on the slope of an enormous rocky hill, overgrown with a bright-green shrub. The sky is overcast with light clouds.

Suddenly, she somehow abruptly found herself outside the mist. In one heartbeat, her vision absorbed so much that her eyelids closed on their own, so as not to damage her reason. It is impossible to take in. She opens her eyes by force of will, having crouched onto the soil. No, better to lie down on her back, face up. Up? The light, having penetrated her eyes, again created visual impulses that forced her to turn over and twist awkwardly in a retching spasm. Ten heartbeats, fifteen. It passed. Emma sketches the seen in her consciousness, remaining voluntarily blind, pressing her eyelids together with an effort for which muscles are not designed. The spectacle that had opened before Emma turned out to be unthinkable.

Emma could see inexplicably, colossally, head-spinningly far! For hundreds of leagues. She stood on the bank of a brook a couple of paces wide and saw how this brook goes into the distance, saw how it becomes a full-flowing river, saw how it turns into a wide fjord and a sea bay. Emma was stunned. She continues to sit on the ground. Her body was seized by chills. She is afraid to fall into this abyss. Her consciousness refuses to believe that she is securely at the bottom. Her hands have clutched the stones on the ground. She pedals her legs infant-like, her soles scraping the grass. Her muscles ache from strange, senseless efforts to hold onto something when there is no way to do so. Her fingers are turning to stone.

After a while, health and youth take their toll. She pulls her organism out of shock, her muscles out of numbness, and her consciousness out of stress. She persuades herself to examine the world.

"Are you whole, girl?"

"Almost unbearable," Emma answers, unable to tear her gaze from the saccades of her interlocutors' eyes. "Who are you?"

"We are ravens. I am a raven and he is a raven. He is a raven and I am a raven."

Before her stand two people with yachting rigging in their hands.

"There is our yacht," one gestures with his hand at the Mastless one on the river that the brook becomes. The water mill also stands there.

As far as the capabilities of perception could take in visual information, the slopes of the inside-out Great Mountain and the serpentines of the five Great Rivers stretch in all directions.

Emma realized that this was an island in a sea filling the large inner surface of a titanic cylinder. The cylinder rotated slowly, creating attraction toward its walls. And yes, it is easily explainable physically why such a wide horizon opened before her. It is one thing to stand on a convex surface, even if huge, like a planet. It is another thing—on a concave one, where each subsequent plan of the landscape lifts the terrain up for you, like rows of seats in a theater, so that you can see it better.

"Come with us, girl. Let your dear one sleep."

"How long will he sleep, good people?"

"We will buy you a barrel organ, you have a sweet little face and a sturdy canvas dress, this world will spin round to your song. You do want your own song, dear? The endgame is the game's beginning."

"I do, good people. But I am afraid."

"Who suffers here? Who fears here? Only you. No one else."

"Why a cylinder, good people?"

"Why waste extra matter, dear?"

"It upsets me that I am dying the slowest death of all," Emma said, looking at her young, human palms.

"Those five in the grotto are not dying at all. They had to become one whole. For a time. And he had to. For their sake. Solidarity responsibility, have you heard of it?"

"And me?"

"And you are not guilty. Instead, you are now—the lectotype. The first one."

"And you?"

"And what of us, we—are ravens."

"What is this place?"

"Poseidon is building a world, since the old one has lived out its age. Someday it will be possible to see the distant stars, as you used to see them. Life always strives to seize all the space available to it. But for now, hands have not reached the far distances. Still, there is enough space here," the Raven made a broad gesture with his hand.

"Is this the edge of the world?" Emma indicated with her being towards the self-luminous sky.

"Yes. As you see, the edge of the world is not a mythical boundary of the visible region of the Universe, from beyond which light simply hasn't had time to reach us. And, all the more so, it is not the result of some stupid explosion, incomprehensibly arising because of what, for whom, and for what purpose."

"Will you be at the edge of the world?"

"Why would we. We will wait until skulls appear whose eye sockets can be pecked out. At the edge of the world—there are merely the waste products of the one who builds the world. Sometimes they are pushed very far away, because one can build as much as one likes."

"How strangely this world is arranged," Emma said.

"You are a strange girl, how else could the world possibly be arranged?"

"And will he definitely come?"

"Where would he go. Here is the Mill, here is the Hydrodynamicist. He will rise and come. Wait. He will reveal himself. And there's nowhere to wander off to here."

"When?"

"[null]"

When the yacht had left, Emma stood on the shore out of politeness. Then she approached the door of the Mill and opened it, noting with a smirk that some sly one had replaced the hair. But a good Hydrodynamess cannot be tricked so easily.

She revived the hearth, went up to the third floor, opening the shutters on the second floor along the way, brewed herself some coffee, unwrapped a pack of cigarettes that lay beside the ashtray [in the form of] the skull of St. Father Bernard, and sat by the window, knowing that someone was, or is, in the room. But what difference does it make, if there is no answer to the question "When?"

"Not a bad foundation for a seventh tower," she said to whomever might be present. "All that remains is to divert the river and give birth."

¶

Epilogue

¶

Light entered the cabin freely. The open porthole's flap nodded along with the wind. Air moved everywhere: much came in from outside; no small amount shifted under the black leather upholstery of the seat. The sound of the flow when she shifted her body was calm, like the exhalation of a large cat. The weight of the maidenly figure was kind to the old yacht settee.

The mechanical clock was screwed to the table, which was, in turn, screwed to the floor. It ticked, despite its lack of freedom, with solemnity. The girl sometimes encouraged the second hand with a wag of her finger.

On the table, as if an extension of the deck itself, lay a handwritten instruction. The rectangle of dense beige paper behaved as though the furniture had been placed under it, rather than the paper set down upon it. From the girl's position on the settee, only the signature was discernible: 'Rector Seraphinus.' She had no desire to pick up the note—on account of the dryness it would provoke on the skin of her fingers. However, she remembered the rest of the contents, including the schedule. Time to go. A large measure of anticipation? Large.

A large mirror hung on the wall. The girl did not see fit to check her appearance. She merely looked at the pattern of chipped amalgam, chased a spider lurking in the corner of the wooden frame with her eyes, and straightened her reflection, stretching it over a pleasing cylinder. The heavy, seasoned oak carling under the deck grunted its approval.

Outside the door, someone passed by, so that—for want of anything to push the girl out of the cabin—the sound of footsteps pulled her out.

⁂

In the corridor was a man. To look at him, thirty years. Strength in the chest. A strange cut of frock coat; at the solar plexus—as if tailored for a chest yet to come. A frame of shoulders. Not tall. His hairstyle—by its very neglect—betrayed an utter self-assurance. He was walking away. He turned at the groan of the door hinges. With a look over his shoulder, he clumsily veiled his delight at

the sight of the girl. The blackest night of a glance—straight into the eyes. Precisely one heartbeat long.

An invisible, even, exact, fine line on the deck floor lay exactly between her feet. Her little shoes, taking steps along the ship's corridor, set down on that line slightly more centrally than walking comfort demanded.

Was there readiness to hear a name? There was.

"Doctor Aris is my name," he said, not stopping.

And her name saw the light of day: "Emma Prithream," the girl called after the doctor.

⁂

The yacht was not large—within a pair of dozen steps the end of the corridor halted them. The doctor opened a door and let Emma go ahead. In the middle of the saloon stood an enormous oval table. No, elliptical, perhaps. At the head of the table, that is, at the sharp end of the ellipse, sat a man of about fifty. It was Rector Seraphinus. The seat at his right hand was free. He caught Emma's eye; his forehead, receding into a bald patch, nodded to her: 'Sit here.' Doctor Aris, uninvited, seated himself at the rector's left, ending up opposite Emma. The table was narrow at that spot. Had the doctor taken the liberty of stretching his legs out under the table, even with his short stature, he could have touched Emma. Besides, three other people sat at the table.

"Welcome to the continent of Pentareach. I speak only the local language. Difficult parts, or those otherwise unclear in my speech, Emma will translate for you," announced the rector. Through Emma.

He rose from the table and walked around it clockwise, shaking hands with everyone present, starting with Doctor Aris. Emma did not receive a handshake. Having completed the circle—or rather, the ellipse—he sat down again. The yacht, anchored in the middle of a large lake, rocked slightly on a lazy wave.

"Our mission is routine, and therefore splendid," began Rector Seraphinus. "I do not doubt that your command has correctly performed the procedure of blocking long-term personal memory for the duration of the assignment. You have access to knowledge, skills, as well as all the baggage of lived experience acquired here."

"So complaints of déjà vu are to be saved for our superiors," the stern, dry, neat elderly lady blended the illocutionary forces in her sentence in the foreign lan-

guage—somewhat clumsily, and thus not entirely politely. One might have said she was fidgety, but for now she sat calmly at the table, and that was only a supposition. Sensing some uncouthness in her remark, she attempted to compensate by introducing herself: "My name is Lariel Heavywall."

"Precisely," said Seraphinus. "Into the same fire go jamais vu, déjà vécu, déjà senti, and déjà pensé. But you won't steal the privilege of introducing everyone from me. Only I know your functions. So then..."

He rose once more, stepped behind the doctor, placed his hands on his shoulders, and proclaimed: "This is Doctor Aris. Scientific consultant. It is his invention that we will be introducing on this continent."

Then he shifted clockwise by some four hours and, spreading his arms wide, half-embraced two at once: "This is Jingo Hattab and Aethelaid Ratu."

Jingo was a towering bald young man, twenty-two at most. His face expressed absolutely nothing. His features were utterly unremarkable, as if before his birth his parents had had the chance to take special measurements and select the most unmemorable physiognomy in the world.

Aethelaid was a young black-haired woman. Of dazzling beauty... but only if you are attracted to ladies past thirty.

"Together with the preternaturally polite Lariel, Aethelaid and Jingo are the First Monarchs." "Rulers," Emma corrected in translation. "Rulers," Seraphinus corrected himself. "Your faces... or rather, countenances... were carved into the rocks hundreds of years ago. In the form... Emma, assist me."

"I can offer no help. There is no analogue in other cultural strata. In simple terms, in three of the local countries there are mountains whose shape matches your faces. From the front, that is. There are no backs of heads there."

"Are there only three countries here?" Jingo asked.

"Five," Seraphinus replied. "But in your place, I would have inquired about the size of your effigies."

"A mountain is a mountain," said Aethelaid Ratu. "Far more interesting is how our faces got here. Hundreds of years ago."

"Foresight," the rector replied, not attempting to hide his disappointment. Though, looking closely, he was not trying, because the chagrin was feigned.

Emma shrugged.

"And finally, Emma," said the rector. "Translator and general consultant. She is no newcomer to the continent, though she too has been temporarily relieved of specific memories that might hinder the work."

"And you?" Lariel asked.

"And I am the rector," Seraphinus said, not embarrassed in the least, having Emma translate: "You have no leader. There are five of you. Vote if you argue. The number is odd, after all. Well then, shall we proceed to outlining the mission? Or first some tea?"

"Let's have tea, of course," said Madam Ratu. Perhaps to smooth over her earlier display of curiosity.

"So, in two countries we get no handicap," Jingo said, ignoring a whole series of preceding remarks.

At that, however, everyone protested, noisily pushed back the chairs—not screwed to the floor—and hurried to the galley. Since morning... rather, since the very beginning of the new times, none had so much as a crumb in their mouth.

⁂

Having heartily refreshed themselves, the five spilled onto the deck. Seraphinus remained below, busy cleaning up. There was no cook, no sailors on the vessel.

"There are no masts," Aethelaid noted.

"And what use would they be," Lariel said. A larch toothpick jutted from between her lips.

"Well, doctor, what have you concocted? What are we introducing?" Jingo demanded information.

Emma watched with interest as the three stared at him. From below upward.

"Or shall we vote?" Jingo, towering a full head above them all, killed the chances of democracy in the bud. "The rector has recused himself, didn't you hear?"

While, under Jingo's pressure, the doctor was collecting his thoughts, Emma enjoyed the breeze. The waters of the boundless Lake Caldera merged smoothly, without any boundary, into the sky. It seemed as though they were in the belly of a titanic wonder-fish. The gulls, with their cries, already anticipated the moment the rector would toss the breakfast scraps overboard.

The doctor did not show any willfulness and delivered—in a tone and text apparently habitual to him—a summary:

"The invention consists in introducing new money into circulation. Each time, with every payment, not only is the tally of coins in the purse recalculated, but a re-evaluation of reputation and preparedness for the next payment is also performed."

The people digested what they had heard for some time. Then Ratu asked for clarification: "Reputation is more or less clear. But this readiness for the next..."

"You paid—you parted with a coin," Lariel interjected. "Which means you grew poorer. Which means you became a riskier potential partner in the future. Until you grow rich again."

"Something like that," the doctor agreed.

"But surely... it's the opposite: if a deal has already taken place, next time it would be reasonable to expect increased reliability," Ratu objected.

"That's what the 'reputation' component is for," Madam Heavywall interjected again.

Emma rocked in contentment, her heels planted on the deck, her back leaning against the springy hemp lifeline. The doctor would have aroused her curiosity, had there been room for curiosity in her now. Landing for a new mission is no sugar, even for an experienced socio-landing officer. So said the Inescapable Mandate. Were a hump the size of a melon to grow from Aris's chest now, she would not have been surprised even then.

The doctor did not comment on Lariel's reflections, only pursing his lips in a gesture that said, the old woman is stating the obvious, nothing to add.

At the companionway opening, the rector's face appeared. He did not trouble himself either with climbing onto the deck or even with a shout. He flashed his bald pate from below and was gone. Everyone rightly interpreted the maneuver as an invitation to continue the working session in the saloon.

⁂

When seating themselves, Jingo broke the order established by the rector and plopped down, along with his restrained odor, onto the chair opposite Emma. Owing to the greater length of his legs, an accidental touch of knees under the table could not be avoided. 'He's spread himself out here,' Emma thought. Neither Seraphinus nor the doctor paid any attention to Jingo's liberties.

"It is the perfect time to offer a prayer," the rector asked affirmatively.

Everyone sat up straighter. The rector began singing in the group's native language, slightly garbling the memorized phrases: "Ooh, how costly is withholding truth and lies! A liar cannot do without a memory vast..."

Aethelaid, Emma, and Lariel took it up: "If you would remember all—then lay your strength entire / Upon the headsman's block, before the axe be cast. / The honest man the Maker lures with Paradise, / 'Your sins,' He promises, 'I'll take from you at last.' / But with his bark the False One frights the sage's ears..."

Then all the men joined in, and the prayer was completed in chorus: "...the Faith of Mutual Breath. / From mutual breath with God the heavy wall / Of all deception down will fall. / I do not lie, lie, lie—can I tell it true, / That I have now believed in you,"—on the penultimate syllable of the final word, all the men, including the rector, naturally dropped out of the singing, leaving only the women's voices to finish "...lieved in you."

A familiar warmth spread through Emma's body.

The rector immediately turned to business.

⁂

"Since you have grasped the essence of the innovation required by the continent, let us begin with the payment mechanism."

He once more, for yet another time, circled the ellipse clockwise and handed each a small brass device, no larger than a couple of fingers of a grown and experienced man. Everyone turned them over in their hands with interest and even some pleasure—the gadgets had small rotors that clicked pleasantly and springily.

"Mechanics?" Jingo asked.

"Mechanics and optics," the rector confirmed. "There is, in principle, no electricity on the continent."

"And no knowledge of it?" Ratu asked.

"And no knowledge of it," the rector nodded. "Practical knowledge. Some books of the Forebears exist, of course, but this matter plays no part in people's lives."

He paused.

"And so it must remain," said the rector. "Emma?"

"And so it must remain," Emma translated what everyone already understood, despite their limited knowledge of the language.

Everyone merely shrugged—as if to say, it wasn't worth mentioning. Having examined the devices, everyone stared expectantly at the rector.

"This is a barter-device. Upon touching and pressing, they exchange data. It is into such devices that the culture of the new payments must be introduced."

"The algorithms for calculating reputation and risk increments—that's on us?" Jingo asked in his own language. Emma translated.

The rector pointed to the doctor, who nodded.

"As well as the very organization of the civilizational habit. Your mission is scheduled to last a year and three Selenes, that is, fifteen Selenes," Seraphinus summed up.

"Unrealistic," Lariel cut in.

Seraphinus explained patiently via the interpreter: "In that time, one needs only to achieve a stable trend. Growth in acceptance of the idea. Naturally, reaching saturation in a year is unrealistic. The continent holds some twenty million people."

"Still unrealistic," Jingo shook his head. "Just organizing production will take half the time."

"Everyone already has barter-devices," the rector surprised the socio-landing officers.

The pause dragged on. No one wanted to play the fool and ask the obvious question.

"Why do they have them, if payments are still ordinary—by coins, you mean to ask? I'll answer," Seraphinus came to everyone's rescue. "They exchange announcements in this way. Thoughts aloud."

Ratu counted the rotors on the device: "Thirteen characters?" she marveled at the brevity of the maximum message length.

"Hieroglyphs," the rector explained. "The rotors set not letters, but pictograms. One of a hundred and eight."

"Ah," Aethelaid Ratu drawled with understanding. "The excessively complex grammar of the language compelled the creation of a niche alternative communication channel."

The rector, with an obvious gesture, noted Aethelaid's intelligence and perspicacity.

"What the bramble, by the way?" Lariel asked with irritation. "Why do they have such a thoroughly befuddling language?"

Her unusually smooth, lively, and glossy hair for her age swayed from side to side as she shook her mane in a gesture of bewilderment. Emma suddenly felt like stroking the old woman's head. Not to calm her, but on the contrary—to steal a little of her inner phlegmatism, the abundance of which Lariel was vainly trying to mask.

"Historical reasons," the rector dodged the question. "And one more important thing..."

He took five caskets out of his bag and began a new circuit of the table, but immediately froze, then changed direction—this time going counterclockwise. Apparently, so as not to seem a ritualist.

"As you know from the Inescapable Mandate, the interference cannot be resource-intensive. As colleague Jingo aptly put it, you have but one handicap, not counting the invention itself and the doctor's theory behind it..." the rector said, partly through Emma.

"If I could only take a look at those countenance-effigies..." Lariel grumbled again.

"There!" the rector pointed a finger in her direction. He managed to do it somehow patiently, without offense in the gesture or a reprimand. "That's what I'm leading up to. Open your caskets."

Emma slid the wooden latch and let the lid yield to the force of a small spring. Inside was... Hard to say what it was. Some kind of trash.

"Mine's spoiled!" exclaimed Jingo.

"So is mine," said Ratu. "Here's a bit of matted wool mixed with hairs. And that's all."

For emphasis, she tipped the casket and dumped the trash onto the floor. Rector Seraphinus grunted with vexation and literally dashed to Aethelaid's chair to

collect the trash back into the casket. Emma could not say with certainty which upset him more—his recent wordless yet clear praise of Ratu, or the mere fact of careless handling of valuable props.

"My fault, my fault," he muttered. Straightening up, he proclaimed: "These are 'tethers of lieving,' the only non-local technology available to you."

"What's this 'lieving' now?" Lariel grumbled.

"Life inseparable from falsehood," Jingo joked.

While Seraphinus was dusting off his trousers at the knees and the sleeves of his frock coat (this time truly just dust), while he was collecting himself, those two managed to exchange considerable mockery in their native tongue. Ratu, naturally, fell silent. What the doctor was doing Emma did not know, for looking at him was costlier—in reply one would inevitably receive a gaze three times as long.

Seraphinus instructed Emma, and she, in turn, the group: "Lieving is a broad concept, encompassing, in particular, 'performance,' 'natural theater.' Cinema instead of life, but no worse than life, because life itself is not exactly life. Something in that vein. In short, it's a recording on film. You need to take a pinch of the clump. Like this..."

Though the pads of her fingers had begun to ache slightly in advance, anticipating the dryness, Emma took a tuft of dirty hair to demonstrate... and found herself elsewhere.

¶

At first it seemed to her that she was an ant, standing on trembling legs before a gigantic marble column of a temple from some forgotten age. On the plinth of the column sat an old man in an old loose frock coat. The enormous flutes rising upward began their vertical grooves far above his head—so vast was the column even compared to a man. Never mind an ant. The column began to be covered with pockmarks and chips, and gradually the column turned into a cliff. The old man's body, his robe—of either an artist or a priest—merged with the mountain. Only the face remained. A powerful face of an old man with long curls. Had she imagined his body only from gazing at the relief of the Effigy, he would have appeared a titan. But she had seen him sitting on the base of the column. He sat, swinging his legs like a schoolboy. That could not be forgotten. Nevertheless, Emma could not deny that it was in stone, on that colossal scale, that his face looked most convincing. At last she looked away from the Effigy and glanced

aside, at the sky. And there she was overwhelmed by an unbearable, steady radiance…

¶

"Emma, Emma! Are you all right?" the rector drew her out of the lieving. "Return to the group, please."

"All is well," Emma said, blowing the smell of heated stone from her nose.

In the saloon, in a half-broken mixture of languages, discussion was underway. Everyone, it turned out, had watched… no, had visited all five effigies. Emma was the only one who had gotten stuck so long on the very first one.

"Now do you understand that this had to be seen firsthand? To visit them all would have taken you half a year," Seraphinus cooed, pleased with the effect produced. "That's your handicap—more like a mega-handicap. Let us pray."

This time the rector limited himself to a short prayer. He began, and all took it up:

"The lute shall be a bow,

The string a bowstring tight—

To press our sides to God

In coffin's narrow night."

Having waited the prescribed thirty-three heartbeats after the prayer, Lariel asked:

"And why are our Effigies all covered in some kind of pox, while those two are as good as new?"

"Yes!" Jingo barely restrained himself from striking the ellipse with his fist in support. "Why are ours all battered?"

"Coincidence," the rector said firmly in the mission members' native language.

The old woman suddenly, completely out of the blue, winked at Emma.

"Rest today," Seraphinus waved them all off with his right hand. He was clearly in a mood to be rid of his "colleagues."

On the way out, Lariel lightly nudged Emma with her elbow: "So much for co-soft-lie-dence." The old woman's gesture further complicated Emma's already so far fruitless reflections: what was the rector truly distracting them from with his

clownish lies in a language that had originally evolved as a tool of intraspecific manipulation.

⁂

Night fell without a sunset. Just like that.

Emma sat down on the settee, tempted simply to lie down and fall asleep. Fresh sheets lay on a stool, folded into a triangle.

Outside, a scratching came:

"May I, dear?" old Lariel poked her head through the door that had been opened a crack without permission.

"Come in."

When Mdm. Heavywall had entered and closed the door behind her, the women were forced to go out again—a noise came from the deck. Of an extraordinary order. Emma thought someone had been caught in the anchor chain.

⁂

There were five men on deck. More precisely—four men and one old man. The latter was hard not to recognize. It turned out that in life the curls of the Effigy were of a grayish-steel color. The stone of ages merely suited him. Alive, however, he was magnificent and monstrous. With him was some smug, slightly potbellied burly fellow.

"Haakon..." rasped the rector's pierced throat. He was on his knees.

The doctor meanwhile fussed about, twitched. His hand kept waving somewhere behind his back. 'Found time to scratch between his shoulder blades,' an absurd thought flashed through Emma's mind. The economic consultant's efforts were hopeless and utterly fruitless.

The black sword in old Haakon's hand was, in its irreparable simplicity, fierce as the indifference of the Cosmos. With three artless swings, the Effigy come alive and unmarred by stone pox severed three of the doctor's limbs—one upper and two lower. Moss spilled from the slashed pockets. The dissection also revealed another hidden component of the suit—a dry micromill.

"Three pieces, like they like 'em," the watching burly fellow said calmly.

"I cain't even count past that, my good Card-Panso," the old man replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

"How come he had no weapon on him?"

"Pride, plain and simple."

"How so?"

"Armoor, the cabbage-head, when he handed over Klogt's staff, he up and blurted that it was on account of a limp."

"Ah, so that's it... Wouldn't own up to being a cripple, then."

Stepping around the torso lying on the deck—which was producing sounds from the doctor's throat and watering the tightly fitted wooden planks with the doctor's blood—Haakon approached Mr. Hattab. Only in that moment did Emma feel she needed to do something. At least scream. But either she thought slowly, or the men lived fast—it was too late.

Hattab winked at the old woman, pressed his chin to his neck, and drew himself up ramrod straight.

"Got you," Haakon said. "Worthy."

He struck with the flat of the sword on the bald head, and it cracked open from above like a nut. The hideous sound of skull mingled with the noble ring of metal. The air filled with a smell whose odor Emma had never encountered before. A bloodstain bloomed through the fabric on his shoulder, though the old man had neither stabbed nor slashed.

Emma glanced around. Both Lariel and Aethelaid were senseless. Emma did not know at what moment that had happened to them.

"There's bound to be pengwins in the hold," Haakon said to his companion, sitting down on the capstan like a weary man.

"Penguins, you copper head," the burly one headed down the companionway.

The old man looked at Emma with immense sympathy:

"You're a fine lass, girl. A fine lass. Look how strong you are."

She sat on her haunches, clutching her head, rocking slightly and mechanically balancing with the muscles in her feet.

Card-Panso returned from the hold with a preposterous huge wooden box, painted up in black and white.

"Why only one? Need three," Haakon said.

"Ah, hold yer horses," the burly one waved off with just his head, stuffing the rector into the box any which way.

He fussed for a while, then asked with hope in his voice:

"Maybe to heck with 'em. What's there for 'em? Don't feel like going again."

"And where to put this one?" Haakon wondered, pointing at Jingo's corpse.

"The crack? We'll dislocate it to blazes."

"Aye-aye. Exactly to blazes," the old man mused a bit. "Well, to Beelzebub with him. That's mercy for him. He's weary of trudging about as it is. How long can it go on. I thought three pengwins would look fine. But never mind."

"And this one?" Card-Panso asked. "Shall we wrap him up? The bloody economist. It'd turn out philosophical."

"Nah... for him a scientific-philosophical wrapper is just like straps for a ritual. He gets off on quality leather on black bonds."

"Maybe stick his face in a pillow—and that's that?" the burly one suggested.

"He can do it himself."

"True enough. He's been stripped of grandeur."

"Stripped of grandeur, you say. Just low aims."

"If only aims. It's but a single aim."

"How to soul-murder him? No point racking our brains—he's got no soul."

"Let him lie about, then?"

"Let him lie about."

"Mebbe cut off his little cause?"

Haakon only waved his hand—the one without the sword in it. He came up to Emma:

"You'll fly with us, granddaughter. Come along, dear."

"What about these?" the burly one nodded at the two women knocked out cold.

"We'll leave them to judge each other. There's no one else to judge them. Besides, one of them has gotten herself all tangled up in this matter. I'm tired of them."

⁂

The airship's gondola was a carriage. More precisely, a hearse carriage. And without wheels. They flew for about two hours. In the carriage were Emma, Haakon, Card-Panso, and the box with the rector. Besides that, in the corner stood some brass cylinders and coils of flexible tubes. Emma had no wish to ponder what propelled the airship.

Despite the shock, Emma even slept for a while.

"Want a look at the continent, daughter?" Haakon asked.

Emma nodded cautiously. There were no windows in the gondola; light came from a small oil lamp. She hoped fresh air would be let into the cabin. It did not happen. The old man slid a panel aside. A transparent rectangle appeared. The light outside was very faint. Air whistled thinly. Card-Panso began to pump a handle on one of the cylinders.

"Looks like a sea star, don't it?" the old man invited the girl to the window.

Emma saw the entire enormous island at once. 'At what altitude are we flying?' she wondered silently. She nodded, as if to say thank you, and moved away from the window.

"The folk hereabouts are like germs in guts," Haakon said.

The girl looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"It's an organismus, dearie. The third replicator," Card-Panso explained.

Emma suddenly deemed it possible to say something.

"Why third, mister?" those were her first words.

She suddenly grew nervous, twitching, stirring, as if with her remark some stopper had flown out and everything was now spilling and blowing out of her.

"Well, 'cause it's after two."

"What're you muddling the girl's head for?" Haakon said. "And you, listen here, you wild thing—stop fussing about. Prithrea, I'm talking to you!"

Emma truly calmed down somewhat. The burly one continued:

"The old blockhead won't let me tell you… sort of… the first one churned your mother-planet under itself. The second… and what's the second? Haakon, copper head, what's the second?"

"The second multiplied short thoughts. Ditties. Shat 'em out so much that first he begot empty-ringing foreheads, and then downright this here," Haakon

stamped his heel on the carriage floor, "the shit you turned into. You just need to believe it, granddaughter. You'll feel it."

⁂

Emma lost track of time. Sometimes she slept. Sometimes they gave her a drink. Sometimes they fed her a biscuit. In the rear part of the carriage, as it turned out, there was a terribly uncomfortable but perfectly serviceable privy.

Now Haakon sang:

¶ You see a woman, but not a mother.

¶ A long eon at the Mill's door.

¶ The beloved can neither live nor die,

¶ No fear of emptiness remains for us anymore.

¶ The loved one is chained in a glassy sleep,

¶ Flung by a drunkard at the worlds' door.

¶ And I'm cramped, the world's become a tent steep,

¶ The bones of a god have beaten my hands to gore.

"Don't you remember?" he asked with sadness. "Of course you don't. Never mind. Soon you'll see the Mother Cylinder."

Emma didn't feel like asking what mother. But Haakon didn't need the question.

"Avertigus be sleepy, running things, a round lazybones."

"Yeah, what's he manage..." the burly one sat in the front row drinking hard liquor. It smelled so-so.

"The little folk give off a boilin'," Haakon says.

"That's called cultural noise, you copper noggin."

"They solve little problems, birth random numbers," Haakon mutters. "They service the privies, where the Big Thing don't wanna climb."

Emma registered internally the supposition that both of them were dead drunk. 'Where are we flying? Who am I flying with?!'

"And the Faith of Humility is nasty again. Mutual Breath, a tail down its throat," the old man switched to open blasphemy.

Emma felt an extraordinary lightness in all her limbs. She was not certain it wasn't a dream.

Card-Panso started fooling around, pouring swill into his gullet from a distance, throwing his head back. The liquid flowed in slow, formless bubbles. Suddenly he started:

"Diligent Forebears, Haakon! How's she going to dance in weightlessness?!"

Haakon smacked his forehead with his palm.

"Shift everything to the sides," he ordered.

The old man crouched down right in front of Emma. He looked her straight in the eye. A very long look. Emma could not but admit to herself that this terrible... unimaginably terrible man... was not frightening to her. And not even repulsive.

He took her clenched fists in his hands.

"Listen, daughter. Granddaughter... You need to dance. Twirl about. It's awkward here, but... nothing to be done. It's very needful. You need to."

Emma, naturally, did nothing.

"Dance, you fool!" Haakon yelled in a frightful voice. "Twirl!"

Emma got up and began to turn, to move. Somehow sideways, sideways. There was almost no weight in her; she kept floating up and bumping her head on the cabin ceiling. This produced funny sounds, if one could laugh.

Haakon sang in a fearsome, powerful, taut voice:

¶ A fiddle in the hand, a ringing in the head.

¶ Underfoot no flatness, a bow to the water.

¶ I spins the moment of the circle.

¶ I dances the cry of the circle.

¶ But Thy will be not done, pray...

¶ Curses from the throat—out.

¶ The vengeance groan of the eight winds.

¶ The waves in the void I crop close.

¶ I dances the cry of the circle.

¶ But Thy will be not done, pray!

¶ An accounting to the amplitudes of waves.

¶ I circles, henceforth I am he.

¶ I closes the sky's circle.

¶ I draw the forty torments.

¶ But Thy will be not done, pray!

Along with the loss of weight, Emma lost her sense of time. And this, for some reason, heightened her sense of rhythm. The old man continued singing. The melody swallowed Emma.

Had weight allowed Emma to collapse in exhaustion, she would have crumpled. But there was no weight. None at all. The girl pulled herself to the seat and huddled on it like a little bird.

"Contact!" Card-Panso exclaimed. "We're on the tether. Sliding!"

For a long hour they hung weightless inside the hearse. The movement was conveyed only by a sound from somewhere above, as if a giant's fingers were running along a lute string thick as a cable. The box with the rector, unfastened to anything, knocked its corners now on the floor, now on the ceiling. To the unnatural convenience of the airship crew, the box was almost proportioned to the cabin's inner height—it didn't bang hard.

⁂

At last everything stopped. Haakon unceremoniously pulled some kind of bladder over Emma's head and pumped air under it from one of the brass cylinders. The men performed the same procedure on themselves. The old man strapped the girl tightly with a belt and clipped her to himself by a carabiner and a line. Card-Panso did the same with Haakon. The burly one tied the box to his own wrist.

When Haakon unscrewed a massive bar, the door flew outward as if struck by a sledgehammer. In both of the old man's hands and in one hand of his companion large rubber cones materialized from somewhere. They drifted outside. It was very cold. The cones turned out to be suction cups. Emma would have looked

down, if she'd known which way down was. All around was only thin fog. Before them was a white matte wall, stretching in all directions farther than the haze allowed to see. Squelching with the suction cups, they crept up to an enormous hatch. Haakon fiddled with it for a while, but it was clear the men were not here for the first time. Their actions were far too precise.

Beyond the hatch was a small cylindrical space. Emma grabbed one of the many handrails.

"A lock-gatory," Haakon said. He was hard to hear. "Soon we'll git a purgin'."

After a while he removed the bladder from himself, and then from the girl.

"One more door, dearie, and we're there. Right there."

'Found time to be encouraging,' Emma thought, who by now had begun to feel she was in control of the situation. She drove away the thought that the matter lay in that ridiculous dance. With every minute she felt better and better. If the old man sang now, she'd sing along with him.

"Did you bring the food?!" Card-Panso exclaimed.

"I brought a drink, too," Haakon patted his breast pocket. This bumped him in some direction, although here, in this cylinder, there were no directions at all.

"Well, what's in there?" the burly one displayed impatience.

"All right, I'm opening. Don't fidget."

⁂

Floating through the hatch portal, they entered the sky. One couldn't put it more precisely. On all sides were stars and Space. Space and stars.

"Eh? What's it like?" Emma saw Haakon's true smile for the first time. She immediately understood that he had worn it for most of his life. She had simply met him too late.

"Transparent walls about a hundred paces off. You can see the whole outside," Card-Panso said, as if showing his manor to a distant envious relative. "There it is, the mother."

Only now did Emma realize that what she had thought was a strangely painted wall in the shape of a disc dead ahead was not a wall at all. It was a cone of some unhuman dimensions. Into its base ran a trunk, about as thick as a fifty-year-old

birch. It was all-absorbingly black. There wasn't the slightest glint on it, and so the object's shape could only be guessed at mentally. Probably, it was a cylinder.

"There, see that," Haakon said.

"Well, that's a fine explanation, you old fool," the partner said with a light, insubstantial reproach. "Look, Prithrea..."

He fixed himself to a cleat, and then attached Emma as well. Haakon managed by himself.

"Where we came from—there's one cylinder. Inside it is the continent. This here, in front of us—that's the second."

"You're second yourself. That one's exactly the first."

"Right. That one is the mother."

Emma could bear it no longer:

"What are you stuck on—mother, mother. Who bore whom?"

The men exchanged glances.

"Explain it in the Forebears' tongue," Card-Panso suggested.

Haakon nodded.

"In interphase, in solitary existence, the Cylinder floats at a Lagrange point," he said. "It consumes asteroidal matter, energy. Conducts astroengineering activity; the people inside live, producing cultural 'fermentation.' But there is a problem: orbital corrections cause gyroscopic precession and 'earthquakes.' This creates risks. The principle of competitive selection pushes towards a solution to this problem. Hence, an initiation of replication occurs, an analogue of mitosis. Clear?"

Emma was somewhat taken aback, but made a gesture as if to say, yes, clear.

"Optimal construction: a paired counter-rotating cylinder..."

"That's the one we came from," the burly one put in.

"Ultimately," Haakon continued, "inevitable mutations: in gyro-stabilization form, in life-support algorithms, in tolerance to human behavior, in energy profiles. Then the pair decay. Haploid phases. In short, life. Will be. And we in it are worse than shit. Though, we were merely shit in the medium of the second replicator too."

"Is this how you invited me on an excursion?" Emma began to understand much more than she would have liked.

"Hey-hey, hold on, hold on. Haakon, look, she's got all worked up. She'll twist our heads off before we can ask."

"Ask what, you blockheads?!"

"Here's the thing..." Haakon made a calming gesture, as if pushing away a cushion of air. It worked.

"Give us a minute," Card-Panso asked politely.

They began arguing among themselves.

"What the devil did we drag the box all the way here for? Couldn't you have gutted it back there?"

"The rector, you mean? What's the matter with you, you moldy dunce?"

"What's the matter?"

"We're going to make him a rectorial witness right now."

"Rectorial?"

"That's right. Like rector. Got it?"

"Ah! Now I got it."

"There. His presence will make the deed finally and fully done."

"Instance... you dick dandruff."

"Who's going to gut him?"

"You."

"No, you."

"Flip a coin?"

"Well, toss it, stupid forehead, in weightlessness."

The bickering fell entirely to whispers, and evidently Card-Panso emerged the winner. Judging by his face, Haakon set about something unpleasant. He drifted farther away with the box, re-fixed himself. Haakon put a glove on the hand free of the sword. Having shattered the big coffin with a couple of sword blows, sending thousands of splinters flying, Haakon seized the rector by the lapels. He

tumbled out in some odd way, but the old man caught hold of a chain under his clothes. The pendant was a fat golden Leo.

"Look at that, a regular Asslan, my foot," Haakon grumbled angrily. The dense air carried his words easily. "They bred counts aplenty. Let him simplify himself. How many times could you ship sectarians across the ocean? Sold Re-surrection for it, the wretch."

It was plain the old man was drawing out the unpleasant moment as best he could. At last he gathered his spirit and shredded the rector into several pieces. Glistening red spheres of blood flew in all directions. Haakon looked closely, made a deft move, and grabbed something out of the air. He returned to his companions and twirled his gloved hand. Between his fingers was a wad of wool with hairs.

"Shall we ask, or let her do it herself?" Haakon asked his partner, rudely ignoring the presence of the person under discussion.

"Let her do it. Only let's clarify about the tether."

Haakon hesitated, shifted his jaw.

"Emma, see that black thing? It's got something like a bearing in the middle. It seems motionless, but that's 'cause the trunk don't reflect light. In truth, the part nearest to us spins slowly one way, and the far part the other. The junction's invisible. But it's there."

"Very useful information," Emma notified.

"You, er... take a pinch of this, please... this is the tether of lieving. Take it, please."

The men had no idea that for the last half hour Emma could barely restrain herself from doing the very things the two fools were taking so insufferably long to do.

Emma placed the trash between her fingers.

For three endless minutes Haakon and Card-Panso watched her face. The sweetest face in all the wide world.

"Well, how's it going, sweetheart?" the old man asked. His face was pure anticipation. Or impatience. Hard to tell in zero gravity. "Remember anything?"

"Just pour the drinks, already," said Prithrea. "That's from the rapier—the record of all our adventures."

"I know that, granddaughter. As for us—" Haakon elbowed Panso in the ribs, sending him spinning, "—we're the same old ones, from the old Cylinder. Seraphinus ate the god's hair, we saw it in time."

"I'm telling you—pour. And you're not from that one either."

Card-Panso, having righted himself to a roughly vertical position, announced, "I never lost my memory. The whole way. All five years. Ever since we ditched you back at that lake by the frozen yacht..."

"Pour, I said," Prithrea repeated.

The former butler assembled sandwiches from a few ingredients—quite skillfully given the difficult conditions—and then a large bottle of gin went around the circle. By the third round, Prithrea said:

"The Doctor, I mean the charron, bribed the judge. Turns out."

"Whoa!" roared Haakon. "With what?"

"Ratu demanded she be ranked second, after the charron, and Virgilia placed lower."

"Didn't work out—not for the wannabe first or the wannabe second," Card-Panso reminded her.

Prithrea raised her eyes to the ceiling in mock exasperation at their thickness: "What difference does it make? There's no difference. Avertigus carried out a verdict that had no legal force because the hearing was corrupt."

"What exactly did he carry out?" Card-Panso didn't get it. "He was just the defendant."

"Why in God's name did Aethelaid have to push ahead of my former Lyuba?" Haakon didn't get his part either.

"You sort out your own relatives, Haakon. Seems like both of them are related to you somehow. And as for you, Panso—you should know by now that Avertigus's mouth is in his own ass. He's an Ouroboros."

"Because he's round?" asked Card-Panso.

"That too."

Haakon added: "Nah, he got turned inside out long ago—through the ass, Armoor showed us. Too bad you missed that show, granddaughter."

"Anyway," Prithrea continued. "He tricked the Doctor. The first world wasn't real. As a result of the lawsuit, he actually built a station. A real station. This one. Can you believe it?"

"So what?" the men, now a bit drunk, didn't understand.

"So what?" said Prithrea. "It's illegal. I'm going to go break his horns off."

Whereupon Emma sang.

¶ I crush the soul of rivers in my iron hands' might,

¶ Forty by forty—the skin is cardboard,

¶ Three times forbidden—wood's in the veins,

¶ Five hundred minus thirteen—allowable!

"Can you do it, granddaughter?"

"Of course. The whole mess is just the fulfillment of the Doctor's contract with the mycelium."

"So what?"

"I'm the main object of the agreement. The prize, basically."

"I still don't get it."

"Power, memory, and free will—in a circular balance. Under the contract, they formally stripped me of will. On paper, I'm their object, not a subject."

"So?"

"So this—" Prithrea let out a loud belch, a big bubble of gin vapors. "I'm going to get drunk. Memory and free will will hit zero. Which means power becomes infinite."

"You're getting carried away, my girl… that's what I think."

"Hey, Panso, tell him—you were an object from the start, what's it like?"

"It's like that and nothing else," Card-Panso mumbled, his tongue thick. "I can firmabide that. Firmabide. I can butler that. I was a butler too. Ever since Virgilia and Armoor were buried five years ago, we haven't even really drunk much, so…"

"That's it. You two get some rest."

She pushed off the wall with springy force and, without any lines, flew straight toward the bearing.

¶ Corpses of rivers in my final tear,

¶ The number in the sand—seventeen.

¶ Coming of age in my hand here,

¶ Time to begin, time to ascend.

"So you say it doesn't reflect anything," came Prithrea's words. "But right there, on the non-rotating part, there's a duralumin nameplate riveted on. 'Decentralized Autonomous Organization "Therapeutic Resort The Seventh Tower"; date of foundation 25 May 2025; disinterested founder and first sole proprietor: Haakon Armoor Goodman (fka Heavywall).' Hey, Haakon, what's a 'fka'? And you, honestly... you do love to rename things every chance your slacker's whimsy gets. Of course... You just can't resist trading memory for the freedom of carelessness, can you?"

She embraced the black rotation like a tree trunk. She began to choke the black rotation. She choked it, turning the moments of inertia of titanic bodies into that into which nobody and nothing ought to be turned.

And Haakon, amid billions of splinters of shattered titans, said to his friend:

"The divine elementalia—not made for doubling, not for pattern-cloning. No Pattern Cloning. It's an NPC. To hell with this double mill. Some chromosome that turned out to be. The supposed commitment to the trinity proved false."

Their smiles the absolute cold of Space chilled into Effigies until the end of Times of this particular Universe.

¶

Coda

¶

A small door creaked open into the indecently vast chamber beneath the elevator shaft—a space comparable in size to the area beneath the Oculus itself. First, a neatly trimmed beard floated cautiously into the room from outside. Then came the head, and finally, the entire organism clad in white garments.

After the whole body, the cane glided into the room. The visitor held it in his hand, but not as a support. He walked across the mosaic stone floor as if the pattern elements were meant to be where his foot landed, not the other way around. Not that this made walking any easier. A fast grey mouse darted across his path. What can you do: though the room was enormous, that did not change the fact that even the original, authentic, primal Oculus was just a hole for stench and smoke to rise to the sky.

"How witty," said the little beard, turning toward the sign on the door: 'Liftman's.'

"Graff-graph! Count! Welcome. Have you seen the news?"

"Ha. No one has ever managed to gaze upon themselves, not even me."

"But you did see the little star in the sky, didn't you?"

The Count shrugged, surveying the hall with both eyes and ears.

"What a fine speaking tube," he assessed. "What sound. Incredible. An acoustic waveguide?"

"Yes. A passive auditory duct. Undetectable. It consumes no electricity at the other end. Just a membrane made of thin horn."

"The waveguide—is it heavy copper?"

"Bronze. Two inches. Thirteenth century."

"Ho ho. I suppose Helmholtz resonators along the central axis?"

"At 487 hertz. Quite correct, dear Count."

"Oh my God! Rector! What are you saying! You have a visual channel too! Passive as well?"

"Of course, Count, of course. Any electronics would have been discovered long ago."

"What a fisheye lens! Incredible. Coherent glass fibers. Lombardy?"

"Northeast, yes. Seventeenth century. A very old bundle. But it requires no maintenance."

The Count stared at the screen:

"Departing?"

"Yes, they're leaving," confirmed the rector.

"Departing, I said," the Count corrected him.

The Count also deigned to express surprise:

"Six people? For thirteen chairs? So, dear Rector, are you planning to torture them?"

"It's that sort of genre. You wouldn't write about the Doctor, given his immense fall. Or, say, record a neuro-film. One does not write about such things. They are NPCs, so to speak."

"To imagine the maximum evil? Only by comparing it to the purpose for which it was done. You are right. Of course, you are right. Well? And what about that scoundrel Jingo?"

"What about Jingo. He's on the job. Some say thirteen hundred already, some say thirteen thousand. The man's working, what can you do. Unless one were to complain to Hattab."

"You are right, you are right. If not for his false schedule earlier, we wouldn't have caught the smugglers, would we?"

"That is debatable. Jingo had no information whatsoever about Uve and his submarine," the Rector countered.

"But then in the bar with the barrel-organ girl, he let them beat him up for some reason, didn't he?" the Count continued to defend the hydrodynamicist.

"If I were in your shoes..."

"You are not in my shoes." the Count said.

"I would not succumb to his charms. Who knows, perhaps he was counting on this paired embryo. He knows that at the slightest provocation, they start tossing sons around anywhere they please. Their own. And others'. A Buffalo is a buffalo."

"You think so? Did he deliberately raise the Judge just to bring her child to slaughter?"

"A cunning little soul. Iris-phantom, voids left by burning wax. He didn't even know the Judge was a real Judge. He just… played with her in childhood."

"But why thirteen?" the Count returned to his concern. "The chairs, I mean."

"The Doctor requested it himself. Later, apparently, he changed his mind. But we will duplicate his command. I am thinking of diving myself, as the thirteenth. You, Nikolai Nikolaich, don't want to?"

"What are you saying! I am accustomed to this place. I will watch over you through the fisheye lens here."

"Did you not come to visit me?"

"Me come to you? What are you saying? What are you, a liftman? No, my dear fellow. You've just arrived. This is my spot. Including the rubbish under the table."

"Well then, happy staying. Bear in mind, Count: the passive surveillance system works both ways. Give my regards to your brother-in-law's cousin—I'll look for a third replicator for him. If I'm lucky—then even a fourther."

A mouse darted across the floor again. This time too close to the Count.

"No, brother-kin, you won't get away," he said in a rapid patter but calmly.

The cane in his hands suddenly broke, turning into a pickaxe. Its sharp point reached the swift creature. Almost. From the lightning strike, the tiny end of a bone splinter broke off, and the mouse carried it away in its pierced tail somewhere into the mouse abysses.

"Isn't that a bit extravagant?" the rector wondered. "That is, I understand, the very pterodactyl bone, the only carrier of a non-fossilised DNA sample?"

"I, my dear fellow, love luxury so much that I cannot help but mock it," said the Count.

Another strike followed. On the empty floor. A crumb of bone rolled somewhere under the table.

"Characteristically," said the Count, "each time the break is as sharp as before. Will you pick up the precious shard?"

The rector tried to answer with a look.

"Hmm," the Count frowned. "I rather thought that back then in the Eternal City, you had slipped Jinngo the idea of the barrel organ as a demonstration of a baroque mechanism."

"Baroque?"

"Excuse me, Western notes slip into my speech. I mean that today's civilisation (and, for that matter, all of reality) is fundamentally libidinal-mechanical: for the sake of a primitive melody squeaked by shitty pipes in a box, they each time build something grandiosely overcomplicated. And as heavy as a non-empty coffin."

"Yes, yes, printing presses for Sunday scandal sheets, a worldwide web for photos of contemptible human-hating cats, barrel organs for a pair of sparse crooked notes..."

— What notes, have some fear of the Almighty, when they put it under their arse instead of a stool. So that you can't even open the lid. The true perversion is to pretend differently from everyone else. The world screws the soul not despite, but precisely because of the baroque absurdity of its own costumes. Shall I kill you? ... But I'm too lazy."

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The Rector exited.

But he came back.

"Are you not afraid, Count?"

"We are but sweet, small children compared to a molecule that decided to self-replicate without anyone's permission."

"Do you believe that in the impersonal register, the highest evil presents itself as a chain of replicators? That which copies itself outside the bounds of ethics, introducing tangible infinities into nature, inevitably splitting reality? That a copy-mind, colonizing the brains of animal species without regard for anything,

without any goal, reconstructs the world for itself aimlessly, absorbing the Unive..."

"That bitch managed to lead me around the barrel, and now you too. Fuck off already, you cunt..." the Count sai...

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[A page is missing. Unfortunately, the vulture-goddess Nekhbet vulture-stamped a 'secret' classification like a heavy wall: Zeus's substance, having reached Earth, merged with Poseidon's in a blue-green plasma. What more is there to describe? — With gratitude to Ψ.]